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August 2004

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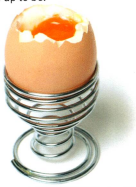
Farmed, free-range or fresh? We find egg brands aren't all they're cracked up to be.



Electric toothbrushes

Do batteries make brushing better — or is that just PR buzz?

Washing machines

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Bank on it

Linda Magee, Manager, CHOICE Online

High fees can erode your bank balance — we all know that. But finding a suitable bank account can be tedious. You need to compare lots of banks, building societies and credit unions, their fees and what they can offer you. That's why this month we're launching a new banking website — **www.flickyourbank.com.au**. It's free to everyone and designed to help consumers find the most suitable everyday transaction account. It shows you eight easy steps to changing your bank account, offers an interactive account selector to help you find the account with the lowest fees, and also provides a little bit of fun. This month's *Hip Pocket* (page 46) provides a few tips on switching banks to get you started, but you'll find loads more information at **www.flickyourbank.com.au**.

CHOICE Online (www.choice.com.au) also takes the legwork out of shopping for goods and services. With hundreds of product tests easy to locate and over 60 interactive tools and features, the website attracts 10,000 visitors a day and has 44,000 members. Our web users like the convenience of locating a report instantly when they're about to buy a product.

And don't forget the website that's free to CHOICE magazine personal subscribers — www.choiceextra.com.au — where you'll find a four-year CHOICE index plus many reports available to read and print. But if you also want the extra features that CHOICE Online offers — extra content, a baby section, interactive compare-a-product tools, databases, quizzes, calculators, plus videos of how we test products — you can have access for the discounted price of $7.50 per quarter (normally $14.95).

FOR MEMBERS ONLY

www.CHOICEextra.com.au

The free website exclusive to CHOICE magazine personal subscribers, with a four-year index and links to many articles online.

Look out for the symbol in magazine articles — it indicates there's extra info on CHOICEextra. This month you have access to our new and used car database to help you choose a car model.

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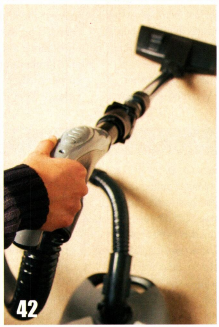

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Photo: Getty Images

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UPDATE

SET-TOP BOXES

CHOICE, April 2004

It appears the **DIGITAL VIEW DSD-103** set-top box we tested was faulty. We sent it to the distributor, Control Dynamics, for repairs and when retested, its performance in the 'fall off the cliff' part of the test improved. If you have this model and are having trouble with poor reception, contact the retail store where you purchased it to organise a repair.

POOL SANITISER

CHOICE, June 2004

In June *Choice Cuts* we reported on new advice from the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) to not rely solely on silver and copper-based water sanitising systems for your pool or spa. The APVMA had taken recall action against a range of this type of product.

Three suppliers of pool ioniser products have subsequently commenced legal proceedings against the APVMA, challenging the recall. The Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) has ordered that the recall of some ionisers be put on hold and has imposed some conditions on their sale pending the outcome of the proceedings. The APVMA recently emphasised to CHOICE that it stands by its original warning.

For further information about the recall action, including information for pool and spa owners, go to the APVMA website at www.apvma.gov.au/qa/pool_spa.shtml.

FAIR TRADE PRODUCTS

Early last year we told you Australia was lagging far behind as far as the availability of fair trade products and labelling are concerned. At the time, only a few types of product (typically coffee, tea, spices, handicrafts and artefacts) were available here, and you usually had to buy them from alternative trading organisations, community-based groups or by mail. Until recently there was no structure in Australia to sell fair trade products on a larger scale.

But things are set to change. Now that Australia has a fair trade initiative — the Fair Trade Association Australia and New Zealand (FTAANZ) was established last October — the number of fair trade products available here, and retailers who sell them, are likely to increase.

FTAANZ was founded to bring together all interested parties in Australia and New Zealand, foster a common understanding of fair trade and raise awareness among consumers. It works to ensure a better deal for the many producers and workers who are marginalised by the current international trading system.

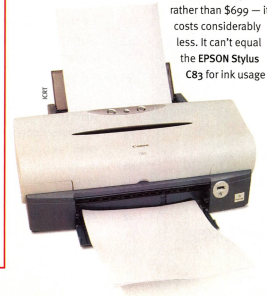
Recognising fair trade products should also become easier. Together with the UK's Fair Trade Foundation, FTAANZ administers the **FAIRTRADE** label (see right). This is used for products worldwide that comply with the standards set and monitored by Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International.

The fair trade movement is only in its infancy in Australia and so far, the only **FAIRTRADE**-certified products available here are coffee, tea, chocolate and cocoa. They're currently sold at a number of retailers and cafés, including specialist shops and healthfood stores in major cities (except in Tasmania and the NT). Retailers

Inkjet printers

The July/August 2004 issue of *Computer* CHOICE tested 21 inkjet printers, looking at print quality, ease of use, ink usage costs, construction and versatility. While some printers can produce very high-quality photos, they're usually the ones that are more expensive to buy. However, it's possible to get a good compromise between quality and overall cost, though in most cases ink is still the major cost.

The recommended printer is the **CANON i560** (pictured below). This printer almost matches the overall top-scoring printer, the **EPSON Stylus Photo R800**, but at $249 — rather than $699 — it costs considerably less. It can't equal the **EPSON Stylus C83** for ink usage (this is the cheapest printer to run overall) but has better scores for almost everything else, making it an excellent all-round choice.



Several printers now come with PictBridge technology, which allows a digital camera to control a printer in much the same way as a computer would. Using a PictBridge-enabled digital camera allows you to print directly without the need for a computer. PictBridge is an open standard, which means you don't need the same brand of printer and camera.

As part of its test, *Computer* CHOICE included three small, portable printers. Two of these — the **HP Photosmart 145** ($299) and **HP Photosmart 245** ($399) — are only designed to print photos on 6 x 4-inch (photo-size) paper, while the third (the **CANON i80**, $449) can print on a full range of paper sizes and types. The **HP** printers produce reasonable results and, at about 45 cents per page (not including paper), they could be useful if you want a small printer to produce immediate results. Both have an LCD screen, but the **Photosmart 145** screen is for black and white text only, while the **Photosmart 245** displays colour pictures. The **CANON i80** has an optional battery and uses PictBridge, but it's expensive to run.

For more on printers and other computer products, you can subscribe to *Computer* CHOICE: call 1800 069 552 or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.

TAMARA GRAHAM

and cafés stocking **FAIRTRADE** products are likely to advertise the fact by placing the label in their shop or window.

If you can't find **FAIRTRADE** products where you would normally expect to buy them, tell your retailer you want them, and/or go to FTAANZ's website (fta.org.au), which should have (or soon have) a state-by-state list of retailers and cafés that sell **FAIRTRADE** products.

Can you help?

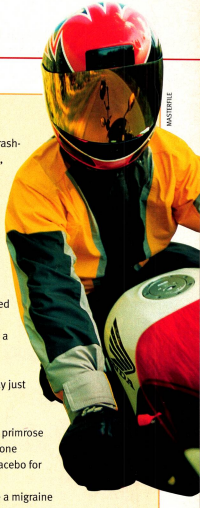
LOYALTY STILL WORTH YOUR WHILE?

Our sister publication, CHOICE *Money & Rights*, would like to hear about your experiences with credit card loyalty schemes:

- Has your card's reward program changed recently?
- Is it worth the cost?
- Have you received any substantial rewards?
- Have you experienced any frustrations?
- Do you feel your loyalty is sufficiently rewarded?

Please email loyalty@choice.com.au or write to Loyalty, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, by August 15, including a daytime phone number. Thanks for your help.

Bright bikers


MASTERFILE

Motorbike riders can reduce their chances of a crash-related injury by taking a few simple precautions, reports the July/August issue of CHOICE *Health Reader*. New Zealand researchers compared motorbike riders who'd had accidents to a group of accident-free riders. The study, published in the *British Medical Journal*, found that:

- Motorbike riders who wore reflective or fluorescent clothing reduced the risk of a crash-related injury by almost 40%.
- Having the headlight on during the day reduced the risk by nearly 30%.
- Compared to wearing a black helmet, wearing a white helmet reduced the risk by about 25%.
- The colour of the bike made no difference.

So if you ride a motorbike, lighten up — it may just save your life.

Also in July/August *Health Reader*:

- A recent UK study has concluded that evening primrose oil — sometimes used as an alternative to cortisone cream or ointment — may be no better than a placebo for treating eczema.
- US researchers say you can correctly diagnose a migraine by answering these three questions: when you have a headache, do you feel nauseated or sick? Has it limited you from working, studying or doing what you need to do? Does light bother you more than when you don't have a headache? If you answer 'yes' to two or more of the questions, it's highly likely that you're suffering from a migraine and not just a headache, and should see your GP.

If you'd like to subscribe to CHOICE *Health Reader*, call 1800 069 552, or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.

Cat and dog fur imports banned

Overwhelming public response to the Humane Society International's (HSI) call last year for an import ban on products made from cat and dog fur has paid off. In May the Federal Government announced it would ban the import of products made from cat and dog fur and that it had asked the states and territories to ensure any domestic trade is also banned.

An estimated two million cats and dogs are killed each year at fur farms in Asia, according to HSI. After an 18-month investigation, in July 2003 the society exposed the horrific cruelties involved in the global cat and dog fur trade that supplies markets worldwide, including Australia — see our brief reports in October 2003 and Jan/Feb 2004.

Australia's ban of products made from cat and dog fur comes after similar action in the US, Italy, Denmark, France and Sweden. "It's HSI's hope that closing down worldwide markets will stymie the industry and save millions of cats and dogs from awful suffering," said Nicola Beynon, HSI spokesperson.

HUMANE SOCIETY/KARREMANN

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to Alan Bainbridge of Chisholm, ACT, the winner of our June label carrier promotion. He's won a **CANON** digital camera.

TAMARA GRAHAM

Children's cosmetics

Cosmetics are a popular gift for children, but they can pack a hidden punch if your child has an allergy. All cosmetics — children's included — are legally required to be labelled with a full list of their ingredients, either on the product or container or available to the consumer at the point of sale.

Late last year more than 30 children's cosmetic products, including temporary tattoos, make-up sets, body crayons and face paints, were withdrawn from sale after the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) found they hadn't been properly labelled. The ACCC regularly surveys all cosmetics and has information on its website about those that fail to meet labelling standards. But for consumers the simple rule is: if you don't know what's in it, don't buy it.

AUSTRAL IMAGES

PRODUCT SNAPSHOT: Delonghi Pastamore PMC 110

The **DELONGHI Pastamore** pasta cooker boasts al dente pasta at the press of a button. Just fill the bowl with water, add salt, and put the pasta in the basket. The pasta is automatically lowered into the water when it boils, is stirred to prevent sticking, and finally drained when cooked. These are the pasta cooker's main advantages: they should mean that you can set and forget. You can also set it to start cooking at a later time, and there's a sauce-warmer that "ensures that a hot sauce will be ready when the pasta is cooked".

Unfortunately 'set and forget' often doesn't work, because you have to set the cooking time according to the directions on the packet of pasta, and the machine can't automatically detect when the pasta is perfectly cooked.

TAMARA GRAHAM

We tried two kinds of fresh pasta and two of dried, and found in all cases that the pasta was undercooked in the time specified by the directions on each packet. Extra cooking was required — and this was true whether using the pasta cooker or a saucepan.

If you use the same brand and shapes of pasta all the time and you've learned the ideal cooking time from trial and error, you could overcome this. Otherwise it's simply a matter of testing the pasta as you go, just as you would when cooking in a saucepan.

As for the sauce-warmer, we found the sauce wasn't hot enough and needed further heating.

Automatic pasta cookers are useful in restaurant/café kitchens where a million things are happening at once — chefs can be confident the pasta won't overcook while they're attending to something else. Indeed, pasta cookers are widely used in the catering industry.

In the home, however, the machine we tested offers most people very little advantage over a saucepan, spoon and colander. The exceptions might be elderly people or people with certain disabilities who can't safely lift a heavy saucepan of boiling water. Even then it's only useful if there's someone else to set it up and clean up afterwards.

The pasta cooker is heavy (5.5 kg), takes up a lot of bench space, has several parts that need cleaning and costs up to $299 (although we've seen it for $239). As our home economist says, "If you can boil water, you can cook pasta" — do you really need a special machine to do it for you? For more information and specifications, see www.choiceextra.com.au.

yourletters

More power to you

One weekend a salesperson knocked on my door claiming to offer discounts on my energy bills. After a cursory introduction of herself and her company (EnergyAustralia) she proceeded to probe my current supply arrangements. Her offer of $100 off my account over three years sounded interesting, but I told her I wouldn't commit on the spot. She reluctantly gave me a number to call for further information but didn't leave any written quotation.

I rang my current suppliers to see if they were also willing to improve my current rates. AGL immediately doubled the offer with a proposal that would give a rebate of $150 over three years and a $50 voucher for use with their nominated electricians. This offer promptly arrived in writing with a period of a month to accept. A third utility offered different rate scales for both gas and electricity that were marginally better than current rates. Its written quote took two weeks to arrive and allowed only one week to accept the offer. However, the written rates were different from those indicated over the phone and in the case of gas was higher than I currently pay.

When I phoned EnergyAustralia to see if it was willing to put its offer in writing it said it could do better than the rate I was quoted at the door — the door-to-door salespeople were independent and EnergyAustralia wouldn't have to pay commission if we went to it directly. These "better rates" were so difficult to calculate, however, that someone would have to call me back to discuss it. I'm still waiting two weeks later.

This confirms my attitude that one should be wary of any offer which appears on the doorstep. It also suggests that anyone who hasn't yet negotiated improved energy rates may be well-advised to investigate further.

Geoffrey R Grinton
Blackburn South, VIC

TAMARA GRAHAM

EnergyAustralia confirmed it uses door-to-door salespeople in Victoria, but told us it asks customers to ring the company while the salesperson is still there to confirm the contract. EnergyAustralia said it doesn't offer a higher discount through its call centres than through door-to-door sales and is interested in investigating how this claim came to be made.

In July 2003 CHOICE looked at how to change energy providers. Before you make the switch it's important to read the fine print: examine the total costs, the duration of the contract, the rebates and penalties that can apply and whether the terms and conditions can be changed by the retailer during the term of the contract. There's a 10-day cooling off period on all contracts.

THUMBS UP!

Shelagh Jelinek of Merredin, WA, awards a thumbs-up to **RM Williams** in Perth, WA. Having bought two pairs of boots two years ago she found she barely wore them because they were uncomfortable. When she recently mentioned this to the store they got her to bring them back in and found they had been fitted incorrectly. Without any proof of purchase and with the boot soles showing some wear she was offered a full credit for the boots and now has replaced them with ones that fit correctly.

Not so CHOICE!

We recently received a letter from 'Choice Industry Research'. Both my wife and I thought that CHOICE magazine, as part of your ongoing research, had sent it to us. However it wasn't clear how or why CHOICE had selected us for the opportunity to participate in 'The Wealth Creation Summit'. After further investigation it appears that Choice Industry Research isn't associated with CHOICE magazine.

A Campbell
Camberwell, VIC

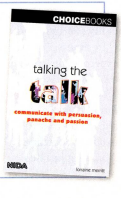
Several people have written to us about this company, which is operating in Victoria. It's in no way connected with CHOICE magazine or the Australian Consumers' Association, and we don't endorse it or its products.

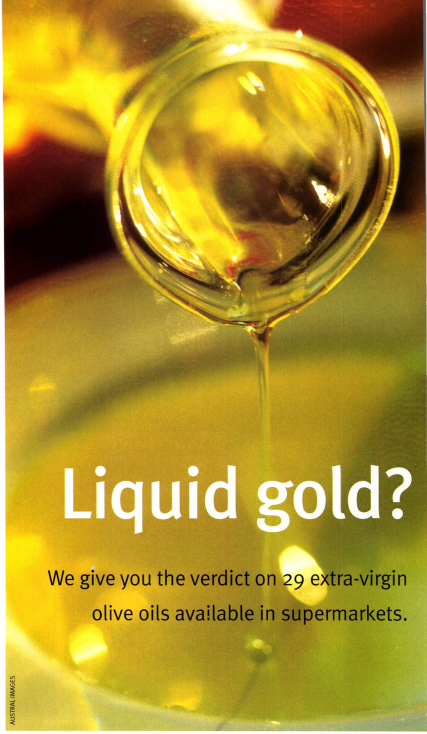
LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. Positive outcomes you've had or a complaint you took to a manufacturer, retailer, importer or tradesperson interest us too. Address these letters to *Thumbs up* at the address on page 2.

To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month.' This month's winner, Geoffrey Grinton, of Blackburn South, VIC receives *Talking the Talk* or any other book of his choice from Consumer Bookshelf, pages 47-48.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.





Liquid gold?

We give you the verdict on 29 extra-virgin olive oils available in supermarkets.

AUSTRALIAN WINES

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Our experts rated 13 of the 29 oils** *we looked at as 'good' or 'very good' — you ought to find one you like on supermarket shelves.*
- **Oil is at its best when it's fresh,** *but the majority don't give enough information on the label to allow you to judge. We want oils to carry a 'packed on' date and acidity range (see* Extra-virgin standards, *page 11) to help consumers.*

Whether it's drizzled over roasted vegetables, tossed through a fresh green salad, or sloshed in a frypan to sauté salmon, a good olive oil can greatly enhance a meal. Judging by the amount of olive oil we get through, Australians are avid fans. Last year we bought over 19 million litres of olive oil — that's almost a litre for every man, woman and child.

Extra-virgin olive oil is the highest grade of olive oil, and we pay a premium for the tag. But as our taste test results show, the 'extra-virgin' on the label doesn't always guarantee quality, so it's worth knowing what to look for.

OUR TEST

We tested 29 olive oils labelled 'extra-virgin', all bought from supermarkets. The majority are oils imported from Spain and Italy, but Greece and Australia are also represented.

Our panel of experts tasted the oils (without knowing the brands), and agreed on the score for each sample. Based on these scores, we rated the oils in groups. See the table, page 10, for results and descriptions of each oil.

The panel judged the oils for quality of aroma and flavour, and also commented on oil freshness. For an explanation of the terms used by experts to describe the aroma and taste characteristics of olive oils, go to www.choiceextra.com.au and look under 'olive oil'.

Our test identified some clear winners — two of them Australian brands — and the good news is that you don't necessarily have to spend a fortune to get a tasty oil. Nine of the top 13 oils cost just $6 or less for 500 mL.

EXTRA-GOOD EXTRA-VIRGIN

Our panel was impressed with the quality of a number of the oils, even going so far as to comment that the quality of supermarket oils overall has improved significantly in the last few years.

Four oils in particular stood out, and received high accolades from our judges (see *What to buy*, right). We've rated them 'very good'.

We've rated the next nine oils 'good': they'd easily do justice to dipping fresh, crusty bread in. The cheapest oil on test — **CARLINI Extra Virgin Olive Oil** from Aldi — fell into this category.

The 'OK' oils had some minor faults, but generally weren't too bad. Two were described as being so bitter that it would be difficult for the average consumer to find compatible foods, but this bitterness didn't offend all of our experts. The other oils in this category could be put to good use as an everyday cooking oil.

We've labelled four oils 'borderline'. While our experts were of the opinion that they still could be used, they all had some undesirable taste characteristics.

POOR TASTE

Six oils were judged particularly poor in our taste test. Our judges felt they had a variety of undesirable taste characteristics which would limit their ability to improve or complement foods — the reason you pay more for the extra-virgin tag in the first place.

To eliminate the possibility that we had bought an oil that had been stored or handled poorly, the panel tasted these oils again, the second time tasting a bottle bought from a different store.

Only in one case (**CARBONELL Extra Virgin Olive Oil**) was the second score good enough to move up a category — but only into 'borderline'. The remaining five we've categorised as 'poor'.

"Rancid", "musty", "fusty, "muddy", "salami palate", "anchovy paste", "dirty", "mouldy hay", "rotten olives" and "mothballs on palate" were just some of the comments made about some of these oils.

AUSTRALIAN-MADE

The Australian olive industry is growing rapidly (see our report on olives, July 2004). But while most olives produced here are used to make olive oil, our shoppers only found two Australian brands of extra-virgin olive oil on the supermarket shelves: **COBRAM ESTATE** olive oil, which is 100% Australian, and **VIVA**, which uses Australian and imported olives in its oils. Both brands feature in our *What to buy* list.

There are plenty of smaller producers that sell olive oils directly in local delis, speciality stores and markets. To get an idea of which are good, look out for ones that win olive oil shows such as the National Extra Virgin Olive Oil Show, held by the Australian Olive Association (AOA, the national industry body that represents Australian producers).

What's in a name?

The types of olive oil you might find on supermarket shelves include:

- **Extra-virgin:** The best-quality olive oil. It's made from perfect olives crushed as soon as possible after harvest and processed manually or mechanically with minimum heat to maintain the flavour, aroma and nutritional value of the olive fruit. It can't have more than 0.8% acidity and must be fault-free as assessed by an expert panel (see *Extra-virgin standards*, page 11).
- **Virgin:** Olive oil with minor imperfections and a higher acidity level.
- **Pure:** A mix of refined and virgin oil (usually around 15–30%), for a mild olive taste. Refining neutralises the acid and bleaches and deodorises the oil, leaving a bland oil with no distinctive colour, aroma or taste. Refining also removes beneficial antioxidants. It usually involves a combination of physical (mainly heat) and chemical processes. Virgin oil is then mixed with this oil to give it some flavour, resulting in 'pure' and 'light' oils.
- **Light or extra-light:** Refined oil with small amounts of virgin oil added (usually less than 15%). These oils are light in colour and have very little olive flavour, but no less fat or kilojoules.
- **Olive pomace oil:** After the olives are processed some oil remains in the paste. This is extracted with solvent, which is evaporated off the oil using steam. The oil is then refined, mixed with a small amount of virgin oil, and sold as olive pomace oil. It's a palatable but bland product.

ALSO ON OLIVE OIL LABELS:

- **Cold-pressed** or **first cold pressing**: this term goes back to when oil was extracted by manually pressing olives between mats, without the use of heat. The first oil extracted was the best quality, while subsequent pressings produced inferior oil by comparison. Today, traditional pressing is almost invariably replaced by centrifugation, where a minimum amount of heat is used to aid the process. The term still appears on labels, even when the traditional method isn't used, to imply a high quality of extraction — but there's currently no standard definition.
- **Early harvest:** Results in richer-flavoured oils, often with a moderate to high level of bitterness and pepper.
- **Late harvest:** Generally these oils are fruity, sweet and mild.

TAMARA GRUZALSKI

WHAT TO BUY

COBRAM ESTATE Murray Valley Blend 100% Australian Extra Virgin Olive Oil Early Harvest	(375 mL bottle)	$7.95
COLAVITA Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil	(250 mL bottle)	$7.02
MINOS Krete's Best Extra Virgin Olive Oil	(500 mL bottle)	$5.98
VIVA Early Harvest Extra Virgin Olive Oil	(375 mL bottle)	$5.44

Brand and type (in alphabetical order within groups)	**Tasters' verdict**	**Origin**	**Price per 100 mL** (5)*
VERY GOOD			
COBRAM ESTATE Murray Valley Blend 100% Australian Extra Virgin Olive Oil Early Harvest	"Freshness was a feature of this oil." Grassy, fresh aroma. Mild bitterness. Well balanced, fruity oil. Good hint of pepper. "It's an Australian oil." "Standout so far by some margin."	Australia	2.12
COLAVITA Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Aroma of green apple and new-mown grass. Some bitterness. "A big hint of pepper — wow!" A fruity, robust oil. "Good to see a supermarket oil with some pungency."	Italy	2.81
MINOS Krete's Best Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Fresh, leafy, herbaceous aroma that carries through to the palate. Reasonably complex palate and great length of flavour. Medium pungency. "A very good, fruity, 'medio' style." "One of the best."	Greece	1.20
VIVA Early Harvest Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Grassy, herbaceous nose, with fresh aroma. Good complexity. Fruit through to palate. Moderate bitterness with a pungency that builds on finish. "Merit for a supermarket oil."	Australia	1.45
GOOD			
ALWAYS FRESH Spanish Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Picual [a variety of olive widely grown in Spain] and pungent, with a ripe, fruity nose. A sweet robust-style oil with some positive characters. "I assume it's Spanish."	Spain	1.05
BERTOLLI Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Characterised by strong bitterness that builds, and late, strong, lingering pepper. Strongly bitter and pungent. "Good fresh fruit aromas."	Italy	1.13
BERTOLLI Gentile al Palato Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Good, sweet fruit on palate. Fragrant, herbaceous nose with a touch of grass or dried herbs. Light pepper on finish. "A good one."	Italy	1.13
BERTOLLI Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil	A good, lifted, herbal nose. Dried herbs comes through on the palate. Mild, but well balanced. "I really liked it."	Italy	2.40
BORGES 100% Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Ripe, tropical fruit (guava) aromas. Intense pungency and bitterness. "Good freshness."	Spain	1.08
CARLINI Extra Virgin Olive Oil (Aldi) **(A)**	Ripe, tropical fruit nose that goes through to the palate. Dried hay aroma. A nice, fresh, complex oil with a bitter finish. "Quite a nice oil."	Italy	0.71
MORO Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Light, tropical characters. Just a touch flabby/tired. A milder-style oil. "Ripe fruit nose."	Spain	1.12
TORERO Extra Virgin Olive Oil	"A little unusual." Fruit (picual) aroma with artichoke on palate. Some pungency which builds. A firm, bitter finish. "Delicious nose."	Spain	1.00
VETTA Spanish Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Tropical, fruity "Spanish" aroma. Sweet, ripe fruit aroma carried through to palate. A pronounced, pungent finish. "Quite a good oil."	Spain	1.10
OK			
ALTIS Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Mild fruit on the nose. Spicy aroma. Milder-style oil with some pepper. Viscous oil.	Greece	1.05
AURORA MEDAGLIA D'ORO Spanish Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Tropical fruit aroma with a fruit-salad-like flavour. Quite peppery. Moderately strong bitterness that builds to dominate.	Spain	0.95
CARBONELL 1866 Extra Virgin Olive Oil from Organic Farming	A strong, robust oil. Ripe fruit aroma that doesn't make it through to the palate. Unbalanced and extremely bitter. Metallic on finish. "Hard to use with that much bitterness."	Spain	1.40
COLAVITA Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Mild fruit aroma, little flavour. "Super mild."	Italy	1.47
COLES FARMLAND Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Ripe fruit aroma. Robust but unbalanced. Pepper and firm bitterness on finish. Slightly buttery.	Spain	0.80
HOME BRAND Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Herbaceous aromas and salad-leaf flavours. Strong pepper on finish. Aggressively bitter (metallic). "Not a bad oil, but difficult to know how to use it." Lacking in versatility.	Spain	0.75
VIVA Late Harvest Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Low in aroma. Tired, but not off — usable. "No bitterness or pungency to speak of: dull and flat." "Not rancid, but uninspiring."	Australia	1.30
BORDERLINE			
CARBONELL Extra Virgin Olive Oil Special Selection	Salami/cheesy and tropical (burnt) undertone. Mild and buttery. Flavourless but has obvious bitterness.	Spain	1.32
CARBONELL Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Low on aroma. "Mild, mild, mild." Tired and a little flat. Quite strong bitterness. **(B)**	Spain	0.90
MINERVA Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Short on flavour. "Bland, tired oil with a hint of underlying fault which lingers and builds." Light, buttery finish. "Really mild oil, with not much going on."	Greece	1.05
PAESE MIO Organic Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Mild oil. "Could finish off with a bit more." Viscous oil, with a refined oil taste. Unusual and distinctive aroma.	Italy	1.35
POOR			
COSTA D'ORO L'Extra Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Musty and rancid. **(B)**	Italy	1.16
IGA ISABELLA Spanish Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Slightly pungent, tired and musty. **(B)**	Spain	0.91
LUPI Extra Virgin Olive Oil	Classically rancid. "Classic salami smell." Musty and rancid. **(B)**	Italy	1.00
PAESE MIO Extra Virgin Olive Oil	"Bland at best, rancid at worst." "Still a rancid oil." **(B)**	Italy	1.10
VALPESA Extra Virgin Olive Oil Fruttato	Still fusty. "Not completely clean." **(B)**	Italy	1.39

* *Based on the price we paid in April 2004. The most widely available supermarket size is 500 mL.*

(A) *When tasted the brand name was Centanni. This changed to Carlini in June 2004. Other than the name, the product is identical.*

(B) *This oil was judged to have a number of undesirable taste characteristics, so was retasted by the expert panel. A different batch of the same oil — bought from a different store — was used for the repeat test, to eliminate the possibility that we had bought an oil that had been stored or handled poorly. These comments correspond to the second batch tasted (see page 9 for more).*

TAMARA GRAHAM

THANKS

We're extremely grateful to our panel of experts who subjected their palates to an onslaught of oil. They were:

- Robert Armstrong: Boutique olive oil producer and director, Nicholas Foods.
- Richard Gawel: Olive oil taste consultant and blender, Recognose.
- Wendy Ambler: Boutique olive oil and wine producer, Chalkers Crossing.
- Nino Zoccali: Chef and fine-food industry consultant, Red Hot Pears Consulting.

PHOTOLIBRARY

Extra-virgin standards

To get extra-virgin status, an oil must meet certain chemical and sensory criteria, according to international industry standards (International Olive Oil Council — IOOC). It must:

- Have no more than 0.8% acidity (see below). Previously the maximum acidity level was 1%, but this changed last year.
- ave a peroxide value (see below) of less than 20 milliequivalents per kg of oil.
- Be fault-free (have perfect taste and odour) according to an IOOC-accredited panel of experts.

WHEN OILS AIN'T OILS

The extra-virgin label isn't currently regulated under the Food Standards Code, but we think it should be. The oils we've rated 'poor' in particular had significant faults, and really don't deserve the extra-virgin label. But they're available on supermarket shelves, and consumers are paying for the tag.

Acidity is a measure of the degradation of the oil. It generally increases during fruit ageing and from harvest to processing, but is fairly stable once bottled. We had a laboratory check the acid levels of all the oils to see if they met the standard. Two didn't. They had acid values just greater than 0.8%, which means that if these oils were produced today, they wouldn't be able to use the extra-virgin tag. Significantly, both of these oils fared poorly in our taste test.

As an additional check, we tested the peroxide value for all the oils. This is a measure of oxidation, and is affected by the amount of air, light and vegetative water coming into contact with the oil during processing and storage. If an oil's good when bottled, it should stay in good shape for quite some time. On the other hand, if it only just makes the cut as an extra-virgin olive oil when packed, it might not be long before its condition deteriorates to a point where the peroxide value doesn't meet extra-virgin standards.

All the oils tested met the peroxide standard. This may imply that the low tasting scores for some oils in our test had more to do with the production process than with the way the oil was stored.

AUSTRAL IMAGES

Freshly pressed?

Olive oil deteriorates over time. You should try to buy the freshest oil possible to ensure you're getting the oil at its best. There are a few things you can check to see how fresh an oil is:

- **The 'use by' or 'best before' date:** Only given on 15 of the 29 oils we looked at — and it doesn't tell you how long ago the oil was packed.
- **The shelf-life:** Of the ones that had use-by dates, their shelf-life range was eight months to over two years. But if there's no packaging date you can't tell if those with a longer life left are the freshest, or if that brand simply gives more time.
- **The 'packed on' date:** Only two oils in our sample gave this date. This is more helpful to consumers than a use-by date, though it's still not perfect. Olive oils may be a blend of oils produced in different years, and a 'packed on' date won't indicate this.
- **Acidity range:** Some oils give an acidity range on the label — 0–0.8%, for example. Perfect olives crushed and processed as soon as possible after harvest will give the oil a low acidity value (such as 0.3% or less), an indication of good quality. A narrower acidity range on the label of, say, 0.2% would be much more informative.

A combination of a 'packed on' date and acidity range, while not perfect, would help you choose the best-quality oil for your money.

THE HEALTHY OIL

The good reputation of olive oil is well-deserved.

- *It contains high levels of monounsaturated fat, which helps to lower blood cholesterol and reduce your chance of heart disease when you eat it instead of saturated fat in your diet.*
- *Extra-virgin and virgin oils are high in antioxidants, which help protect against heart disease and cancer. Robust or early-harvest oils are generally higher in antioxidants than the milder, riper oils.*
- *Diets rich in olive oil instead of other fats or oils may help reduce blood clotting and ultimately heart disease.*

Olive oil tips

BUYING EXTRA-VIRGIN

- Heat and light can affect oil quality. Try to avoid oils that have been displayed in a shop window exposed to direct sunlight.
- Don't buy extra-virgin oil based on colour. It's not a good indicator of taste.
- Read the label on the bottle to see if there's any information about flavour or style, such as early or late harvest (for more information see *What's in a name*, page 9).
- Check the country of origin. Some generalisations can be made about the style of oils from different countries. Spanish oils tend to be made from ripe olives and have full, fruity flavours with tones of melon and nuts. Italian oils can have a range of flavours, depending on their style.
- Time is the biggest enemy of olive oil, so you want to buy the freshest oil possible. Unfortunately, even when the oils have a use-by date, it's not very useful on its own. See *Freshly pressed?*, left.

COOKING

- Olive oil isn't just a type of fat. Think of it as a seasoning that adds to or complements other flavours.
- For more flavour use a strong-tasting extra-virgin oil in salad dressings or soups, for example, or for roasting or putting on jacket potatoes.
- For everyday cooking or when preparing delicately flavoured foods such as fish, use a milder extra-virgin oil.
- You can reuse olive oil, but each time you reheat and cook it, some flavour and freshness will be lost.

STORING

- Keep olive oil tightly stoppered — it's a sponge for other odours and flavours.
- Olive oil should be kept in a cool, dark place. From the moment it comes out of the olive it gradually deteriorates, so don't hoard it.

Gourmet coffee at home

Can you make coffee at home that's anything like the 'real thing' from a café?

IN A NUTSHELL

- **On test: 12 pump espresso machines** *ranging in price from around $200 to a little under $1000.*
- **The cheapest in the test** *was among the best, the most expensive the worst.*
- **Don't let gimmicks fool you.** *With a bit of experience, we could make better milk froth the conventional way than with some of the specially supplied froth enhancers.*

If you've walked through the small appliance section in your local department store lately you've probably noticed the ever-increasing number of coffee makers on offer. After all those years on instant, we've apparently taken to Italian-style coffee with a vengeance and are spending more and more on domestic espresso machines to enjoy gourmet coffee at home.

To find out if these machines can produce a good espresso with pale golden crema and steam the milk into silky smooth froth, we bought 12 machines that sell for less than $1000 and put them through their paces. Three experts from the coffee industry helped us, drinking their way through cup after cup of espresso to give their verdict.

VARIED RESULTS

The results from the taste test, ease of use evaluation, milk frothing assessment and other tests varied considerably from machine to machine, and price doesn't seem to be a decisive factor.

In the taste test, scores ranged from 30% to 75%. The latter isn't too bad, considering that our coffee tasters, professionally trained experts, compared the quality of the espresso these machines produced to that you'd get from a good commercial machine. It shows that some machines in the under $1000 price range can produce quite decent coffee.

How well the machines can froth milk also varied considerably, with scores ranging from 20% to 70%. Some come with a special froth enhancer,

WHAT TO BUY

KRUPS Nespresso 893		$499
SAECO Magic Espresso		$349
BREVILLE ESP8	BEST BUY	$194

GETTY IMAGES

PHOTOS: TAMARA GRAHAM

KNOWING YOUR COFFEE

If you don't know what makes a macchiato, mocha, ristretto and the rest, check our April 2003 magazine (or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on 'espresso machines' in the index), which includes a list of different types of coffee drinks and instructions on how to make them.

Previously tested models

Nine of the espresso machines we reported on in April 2003 are still available. They're listed below in rank order with their current price. We couldn't add them to the table of new machines because we changed the test protocol and you can't directly compare the scores below with those from this test. For the new test we used freshly ground coffee, and we found that making the milk froth the traditional way (without a special froth enhancer) got us better results than by using the manufacturers' doodads.

	Overall score (%)	Price ($)*
KRUPS Novo 2100 Plus F962	70	280
BREVILLE Café Roma ESP6	69	170
DELONGHI Elettronica EC430E	65	499
SOLIS Crema SL 70	63	499
SAECO Magic Cappuccino Espresso SIN 017R	62	449
GAGGIA Evolution Espresso	60	399
LA PAVONI Eurobar De Luxe V230	60	780
SUNBEAM Café Crema EM4800	56	280
SUNBEAM Bar Espresso EM3500	50	180
GAGGIA Classic Coffee/B	43	629

The **KRUPS Novo 2100 Plus F962** is only cosmetically different from the new model **KRUPS Novo Plus FNC131.**

The **BREVILLE Café Roma ESP6,** which is only cosmetically different from this year's Best Buy, scored best for coffee making and taste and well for milk frothing. Just like the **ESP8**, it scored a littler lower than some other models for ease of use.

The **DELONGHI Elettronica EC430E** was easiest to use in the test and the **SOLIS Crema SL 70** had a perfect score for milk frothing.

At the other end of the scale, the **GAGGIA Classic Coffee/B** had the lowest score for coffee making, including the equal lowest for taste, and the **SUNBEAM Bar Espresso EM3500** the lowest score for ease of use.

**Prices are recommended or average retail, provided by manufacturers in March 2004.*

intended to make frothing foolproof for those inexperienced in this skill. It's a plastic sleeve you slip over the steam nozzle, plunge into the milk and, *voilà*, the machine does the rest.

Enhancers made it easy, admittedly, but the froth was rarely as good as when we made it the conventional way. The special device made 'hard' froth with big bubbles that you have to spoon out of the jug. The conventional method, with a little skill of course, produced a much creamier, 'pourable' froth with small bubbles — a difference that's worth practising for.

ALL PACKAGED

The two **KRUPS Nespresso** machines in the test scored well overall, and making coffee with them is pretty easy — you don't have to measure and fill coffee manually into the filter basket. Instead you insert a special Nespresso coffee cartridge, which contains the appropriate dose for one cup (you can only make one cup at a time) and set the machine to work.

The downsides are that you pay for the added convenience — it's more expensive to use cartridges rather than coffee you buy pre-ground or grind yourself — and you have no alternative and create more rubbish. A cup of coffee made with a Nespresso machine costs around 60 cents, which is considerably more than the 21–23 cents it would cost to make a cup using a conventional espresso machine (based on a price of around $30 for 1 kg of coffee and the recommended amount of 7 g per cup).

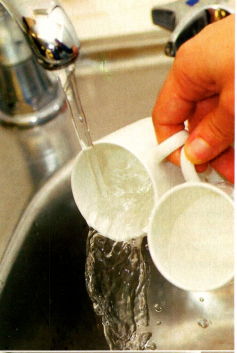
When you buy a **KRUPS Nespresso** machine, it comes with four packets of 10 coffee cartridges. For your future supply you can buy multiples of five packets and choose from nine different flavours. One packet of ten cartridges cost $5.90; postage and handling is $6.60, regardless of the quantity you buy.

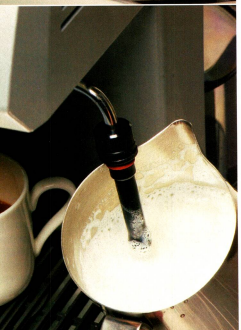
THE VERDICT

The **KRUPS Nespresso 893** and the **SAECO Magic Espresso** scored best overall. Of these two, the **KRUPS** made the better-tasting coffee, but it wasn't as hot as it ought to be, and it costs more per cup than with the **SAECO**, which is both cheaper to buy and to run. But at only $194, the **BREVILLE ESP8** is obviously the best buy. It's the cheapest in the test, scored the same as the **SAECO Magic Espresso** for coffee making and is better for milk frothing. See the table, page 16, for the full test results

HOT!

Keep a coffee maker away from children's reach, and use common sense when frothing milk and removing, emptying and cleaning a hot filter basket or the steam nozzle, which can all get quite hot.





WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR ...

... WHEN BUYING AN ESPRESSO MACHINE

- A pump or pump thermoblock machine that operates at high pressure is essential for making good Italian-style coffee with good crema — the creamy, shiny froth on top that indicates the espresso is properly extracted. Cheaper steam-only espresso machines like those we tested for our April 2001 tests couldn't make decent coffee.

A pump thermoblock is claimed to heat the water quickly to the perfect temperature for coffee making and milk frothing. But we found in this and previous tests that both the time taken to make the first cup and the brewed coffee temperature were generally unrelated to whether it was a pump thermoblock or not.

- The water tank should be easy to remove and fill and the water level easy to check.
- The controls should be easy to operate.
- The exterior should be free of grooves for easy cleaning. Stainless steel looks good when new, but generally takes more effort to keep looking shiny.
- A removable drip tray makes cleaning easier.
- Adjustable steam delivery makes milk frothing easier.
- The steam nozzle should have sufficient space around it so you can easily manoeuvre a jug under it.

... BEFORE EVERY USE

- Fill the water tank with fresh water and run a small amount through the pump before making coffee to prime the machine, even if it's warm.
- Warm up cups on the cup warming plate, or rinse them with warm water — coffee temperature drops quickly and quite significantly in a cold cup.

... WHEN MAKING COFFEE

- An Italian-style (espresso) coffee is usually recommended, darkly roasted and finely ground.
- Experts recommend you grind your own rather than buy pre-ground coffee (see page 18 for our test of coffee grinders) and then experiment with the grind to match your espresso machine. If it's too coarse, the coffee will be too watery and you won't get good crema, but too fine a grind can clog up the filter basket and won't let the water come through.

(Our experts' rating of pre-ground coffee for plungers in CHOICE June also bears out the advice to grind your coffee freshly — none of the pre-grounds was rated highly.)

- A shot of espresso (30 mL) should pour out of the spout in 30 seconds. If it takes less time, the grind is too coarse; if it takes longer, it's too fine.
- Use the correct amount of coffee (7 g for 30 mL of espresso) and pack it tightly into the filter basket. For a longer/weaker coffee, don't let more hot water run through the machine — it'll make the coffee too bitter. Instead half-fill the cup with hot water and then add one or two shots of espresso; this way you preserve the crema.

... WHEN FROTHING MILK

- If you intend to froth milk regularly, it's probably worth investing in a small metal thermometer that fits inside the frothing jug so you can monitor the milk temperature while frothing. Aim for 65–70°C; any higher will burn the milk and affect its flavour.
- Froth milk immediately after making coffee, otherwise the espresso will cool down too much. Fresh, full-cream milk gives the best results when frothing. Light or skim milk froth dissipates sooner.
- Each machine is different, so experiment with the steam operation. Ideally, the steam output should be constant and high so you can froth the milk quickly.
- Pour cold milk into a jug to just less than half full. Place the nozzle into the jug just below the surface of the milk and turn on the steam control switch for a few seconds. Angle the jug slightly and turn on the steam to full pressure. Move the jug down slowly as the froth rises until small bubbles have formed and the milk has almost doubled in volume.
- When the milk has reached about 60°C (or, if you're using a stainless steel jug, when it gets too hot to touch), plunge the nozzle to the bottom and heat (but not boil) the milk for a few seconds. The milk is now ready for pouring onto the coffee.
- Clean the nozzle and then run a small amount of water through the machine, so the built-up steam won't burn the coffee you make next.

Profiles

Profiles are of the models in the *What to buy* list, in rank order. Prices are recommended or average retail, as provided by manufacturers in May 2004.

KRUPS NESPRESSO 893

Price: $499 (The manufacturer told us in May it was just about to drop the recommended price to $399.)
Exterior: Plastic

GOOD POINTS

- Good at frothing milk (without its froth enhancer).
- One of the fastest to make the first cup of coffee.
- The tank is easy to fill and the water level easy to check.
- Very good controls.

BAD POINTS

- You can only use it with **NESPRESSO** coffee cartridges, not with plain ground coffee (see *All packaged*, page 14), which makes it expensive in the long term, as well as to buy.

- You can only make one cup at a time.
- You can't adjust the amount of steam for frothing.
- The coffee temperature (in the cup) was lower than with most other machines.

SAECO MAGIC ESPRESSO

Price: $349
Exterior: Plastic

GOOD POINTS

- Frothing milk is very easy.
- Very good controls.

BAD POINTS

- Nothing in particular.

BREVILLE ESP8

Price: $194 BEST BUY
Exterior: Stainless steel

GOOD POINTS

- Good at frothing milk (without its froth enhancer).
- Has a 'drip tray full' indicator.
- The least expensive in the test.

BAD POINTS

- The water level is hard to see.
- You can't adjust the amount of steam for frothing, and the steam is slow to build up.

PHOTOS: YIANNI GRAVANIS

Thank you

Our thanks go to David and Matthew Gee from Monte Coffee and Lance Witham from Witham's Coffee, who helped us assess the espresso makers by drinking their way through lots of espressos made with the machines on test.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)
KRUPS Nespresso 893	73
SAECO Magic Espresso	73
BREVILLE ESP8	69
KRUPS Nespresso FNA1	68
SAECO Via Venezia Espresso SIN 006X	68
SUNBEAM Café Latte EM5400B	68
DELONGHI EC410	66
SUNBEAM Café Aromatic EM5800	62
GAGGIA Baby Gaggia **(A)**	60
DELONGHI EC650	56
GAGGIA Cubika	51
LA PAVONI Europiccola Professional V230	46

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- With one exception, the remaining espresso makers scored lower than the models in the *What to buy* list for coffee making, including in the taste test. The exception, the **SUNBEAM Café Latte EM5400B**, made the best-tasting coffee in the test, but was let down by lower scores for ease of use and milk frothing and filled two cups unevenly. If you use it mainly to make latte (which doesn't have much milk froth), as its name suggests, this may not worry you.
- Just like the profiled **KRUPS Nespresso 893**, the **KRUPS Nespresso FNA1** can only make one cup at a time, and you have to use special coffee cartridges, which drives up your coffee making costs.

It's hard to fit the jug under the spout of both Gaggias — see above right.

			COMPONENTS OF COFFEE-MAKING SCORE			FEATURES		SPECIFICATIONS				
se of use e (%)	3 Milk frothing score (%)	4 Coffee making score (%)	5 Taste test score (%)	6 Time to brew first two cups (min:sec)	7 Coffee temperature (°C)	8 Cup-warming area	9 Cord storage	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
	70 **(B)**	71	70	3:30	69	✓	✓	1	Portugal	Groupe SEB	499 **(C)**
	60 **(B)**	70	65	4:30	82	✓		1	Italy	Saeco	349
	70 **(B)**	70	65	5:00	86	✓		1	China	Breville	194
	70 **(B)**	62	55	3:15	71			1	Switzerland	Groupe SEB	649 **(D)**
	60 **(B)**	67	60	4:00	83			1	Italy	Saeco	549
	50 **(B)**	76	75	4:15	76	✓		1	China	Sunbeam	350
	50 **(B)**	65	60	5:15	80		✓	1	Italy	DeLonghi	299
	50 **(B)**	63	60	5:15	70	✓		1	China	Sunbeam	450
	40	59	55	6:30	75			1	Italy	Gaggia	599
	20	60	55	5:45	75	✓		1	Italy	DeLonghi	449
	30	49	40	6:30	75	✓		1	Italy	Gaggia	349
	60 **(B)**	38	30	8:45	70			1	Italy	EuroEspresso	930

* *Prices are recommended or average retail, provided by manufacturers in May 2004.*

(A) *Discontinued but you may still find it in shops.*

(B) *Milk frothing test done without the froth enhancer (or, for the La Pavoni, the automatic frother), as this gave better results; see* Varied results, *page 13.*

(C) *The manufacturer told us in May it was dropping the recommended price to $399.*

(D) *The manufacturer told us in May it was dropping the recommended price to $599.*

The **SAECO Via Venezia Espresso SIN 006X** has a large water tank, but the water level is hard to see.

When you make two cups of coffee with the **DELONGHI** machines, they fill unevenly, and the automatic milk frother on the **EC650** is fiddly to clean.

Uneven fill of two cups is also a problem for the **SUNBEAM Café Aromatic EM5800**, though you can program it to make one cup rather than two. The steam is slow to build up and you can't adjust it for frothing.

On both **GAGGIA** machines, the steam nozzle is too close to the benchtop, which leaves little room to manoeuvre the jug (see the photo, below left). Furthermore, coffee leaked out of the **Baby Gaggia** when we used it with its 'perfect crema' device, but the manufacturer said its latest crema discs have been modified and shouldn't cause any leakage.

Last of all, the shiny chrome **LA PAVONI Europiccola Professional V230** ... conspicuous in all respects. With its 'retro' look (see the photo, below — according to the manufacturer, the design hasn't changed since 1956), it not only looks different to all the other espresso machines in the test, but it also stood out because:

It's the only machine in the test with a manual pump — you have to move a lever down to push the water through the coffee.

It scored lowest overall — notably for coffee making (including the taste test) and for ease of use. It was also the slowest to make the first cup and filled two cups unevenly.

Its chrome exterior, with many places for dirt to get trapped, is particularly hard to keep clean and the tank and filter basket holder get very hot.

And at $930, it's the most expensive machine in the test.

On the positive side were a tank that's easy to fill (but small), a water level that's easy to check and a frothing mechanism that's easy to use.

The La Pavoni: classic design but not very good coffee (see left).

1 Overall score

This consists of:

- Ease of use: 30%.
- Milk frothing: 10%.
- Coffee making: 60%.

2 Ease of use score

We assessed how easy the tank is to fill and the water level to see, the coffee basket to fill and the milk to froth. We also checked how easy the machine is to clean and to use. All aspects are weighted equally.

3 Milk frothing score

We evaluated the machines' milk frothing ability by the quality of the froth we created with them.

4 Coffee making score

We considered the results of the taste test (70%), how long it took to make the first cup (or two, if the machine made two at a time) of coffee (15%) and how hot the coffee was (15%).

5 Taste test score

Three experts from the coffee industry evaluated the quality of the espresso each machine produced. They judged the crema's colour and thickness, and the coffee's aroma, flavour, mouthfeel and aftertaste.

For all but the two **KRUPS Nespresso** machines, which we tested with the coffee cartridges supplied, we used freshly ground coffee for the taste test. This is a change in test protocol, so you can't compare these scores with those from our previous tests.

6 Time to brew first cup (or two)

This is the time it took (to the nearest 15 seconds) to make the first cup (or two) of espresso, starting with a cold machine, including warm-up time.

7 Coffee temperature (°C)

We measured the coffee temperature in a pre-warmed cup immediately after it was made. The water temperature coming out of the coffee filter holder (technically called the 'group') of an espresso machine should be well over 80°C, and should drop by no more than a few degrees in a pre-warmed cup.

8 Cup-warming area

Some models have a warming plate to warm cups before use.

9 Cord storage

A cavity underneath the machine can be useful for storing excess cord, which can be dangerous left lying on a benchtop.

Coffee grinders

PHOTOGRAPHY: MEGAMAN

Of the eight coffee grinders on test, only half produced a grind fine enough for a good espresso.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Half of the coffee** *grinders on test, including the two cheapest, couldn't produce coffee ground finely enough to make espresso using two different types of espresso makers.*
- **Two models produced** *a very fine grind and are very easy to use ... and they're not the most expensive either.*
- **While some grinders** *are very easy to use, others make so much mess that they'll probably end up at the back of the cupboard rather than in regular use.*

Grinding your own coffee is a must if you're after that perfect cup — a good espresso machine alone won't do the trick. So, to complement our test of espresso makers (pages 13–17), we bought eight coffee grinders ranging in price from $38 to $480. We used them with two types of espresso machine (an automatic one and one with a manual pump) to find out which ones gave a good espresso grind suitable for use with an Italian-style coffee maker.

Just like the espresso machines tested, the grinders varied considerably in our test, with overall scores ranging from 43% to 93%. For this score we considered the machines' ability to grind coffee beans finely enough for use in an espresso machine and how easy they are to use. Both aspects are equally important. If a machine can't grind coffee finely enough, you won't get good espresso, and if it's too awkward to use, or makes too much mess, you'll probably stop using it.

THE RESULTS

To make good espresso with a pale golden crema, you need very finely ground coffee, but only half the grinders on test were able to produce such a fine grind. Of these four, the equal top-scoring **DELONGHI KG100** and **SOLIS Scala Type 166** (which we think are basically the same) were also the easiest to use — they're pictured above and right.

Both models have a timer, which automatically stops the grinding after a preset time, and both are easy to empty without making a mess. No coffee particles flew out of these models when we emptied the ground coffee compartment. The **SUNBEAM** and **BREVILLE**, on the other hand, left the kitchen benchtop in a mess.

For more details about the grinders on test, see the table, right. ■

What to buy

Brand / model	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Fineness of grind score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	Noise (dB)	4 Time to grind 30 g of coffee (sec)	FEATURES/SPECIFICATIONS 5 Timer	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($) *
DELONGHI KG100 **(A)**	93	90	95	74	34	✓	1	Switzerland	DeLonghi Aust	169
SOLIS Scala Type 166 **(A)**	93	90	95	75	36	✓	1	Switzerland	Diamond 'C' Services	169
LA PAVONI Modello Jolly	83	90	75	80	65		1	Italy	EuroEspresso	480
GAGGIA MMBLA	70	90	50	82	50		1	Italy	Shriro Aust	149
SAECO 2002 Nero Australia Mac 001	63	50	75	79	50		1	Italy	Saeco	229
GAGGIA MDFBLA	52	40	63	79	70		1	Italy	Shriro Aust	349
BREVILLE Café Roma CG12	50	40	60	78	38	✓	1	China	Breville	38
SUNBEAM EM0430	43	20	65	78	25	**(B)**	1	China	Sunbeam	80

* *Prices are recommended retail, provided by manufacturers in May 2004.*

(A) *As far as we can establish, these two machines are essentially identical.*

(B) *No timer, but the machine will switch off automatically when all coffee has been ground.*

The low-down on ground coffee

- Grind only as much coffee as you need at a time — ground coffee deteriorates quickly. Both grinders in the *What to buy* list have a timer that'll help you grind just the right amount.
- If you do have ground coffee left over, store it in an airtight container in a cool, dry and dark place. Don't store it in the fridge or freezer — that it'll keep fresher there is "an old wives' tale", according to experts from our espresso machine test. Unless the container is absolutely airtight, the ground coffee will attract moisture that'll make it go stale quicker in the fridge, and it'll absorb odours from other food. Also, coffee needs to be at room temperature so it won't cool the water as it flows through the grind.
- Don't keep beans in the grinder, store them in an airtight container.
- Clean the bean container and ground coffee chamber regularly to remove any residual oils that can go rancid.

1 Overall score

This consists of:

- Fineness of grind: 50%.
- Ease of use: 50%.

2 Fineness of grind score

We ground coffee beans on the finest setting on each machine and then used the ground coffee in two espresso machines (an automatic one and one with a hand pump) to establish whether it was fine enough for the water to push through and extract all the flavours.

3 Ease of use score

We considered how easy the grinders are to use and clean, how easy the controls are to adjust and how easy it is to grind coffee. Each aspect was weighted equally.

4 Time to grind 30 g of coffee

The time it takes to grind enough coffee for four espressos.

5 Timer

You can preset the machine to grind a certain amount of coffee, say for two, four or six cups, so you won't grind more than you need.

As far as we could establish, the two top-scoring coffee grinders are essentially identical. The comments below apply to both models.

DELONGHI KG100

SOLIS SCALA TYPE 166

Price: $169

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent results for fineness of grind.
- Very easy to use.
- Easy to empty and very easy to clean — no coffee particles fly out of the ground coffee compartment when you empty it.
- Very easy to adjust the fineness control.
- Comparatively quiet.
- Automatic timer for number of cups.

BAD POINTS

- None in particular.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The **LA PAVONI Modello Jolly** produced perfectly ground coffee and scored very well overall, but its $480 price tag is pretty steep, considering you can get others that are easier to use for much less. The **GAGGIA MMBLA**, too, was excellent for fineness of grind, but was the worst in the test for ease of use.

The remaining four grinders were unable to grind coffee finely enough for the espresso machines we used, so we can't recommend them for espresso. In the test they produced a coarse grind that resulted in weak espresso where the flavours hadn't been properly extracted.

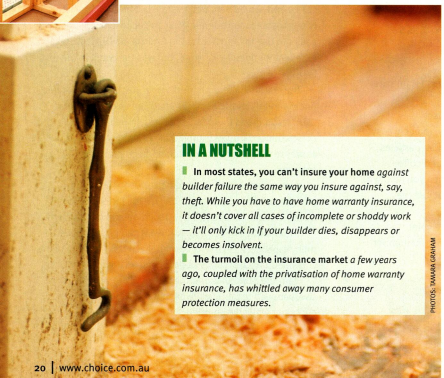
If you're interested in grinding coffee for use with a plunger or filter, note that the **LA PAVONI** and **SAECO** don't have a timer and have to be switched on and off manually.

The **GAGGIA MDFBLA** and **SUNBEAM** had problems with their dispensers. On the former it delivered 6 g instead of the conventional 7 g of coffee per cup, and on the latter only 5 g.

Both the **SUNBEAM** and the **BREVILLE** are very messy to use, with coffee particles flying out of the ground coffee container when we emptied it.

Insurance in name only

Home warranty insurance is mandatory, but in most states many consumer protection measures have been whittled away over the years.



PHOTOS: SARAH GRAHAM

IN A NUTSHELL

- **In most states, you can't insure your home** *against builder failure the same way you insure against, say, theft. While you have to have home warranty insurance, it doesn't cover all cases of incomplete or shoddy work — it'll only kick in if your builder dies, disappears or becomes insolvent.*
- **The turmoil on the insurance market** *a few years ago, coupled with the privatisation of home warranty insurance, has whittled away many consumer protection measures.*

If you've built a home or renovated in recent years, you're probably aware of the problems that have surrounded home warranty insurance. If you haven't, and you're planning to do so in the near future, you need to know about it.

Home warranty insurance — also known as builders' warranty, building, housing or home indemnity insurance — was originally intended as a consumer safeguard to protect you from financial loss when your builder failed to complete the work or meet certain standards.

It's still in place and mandatory — see *How the insurance works*, below right, for some details of how it now works. But in the states where it's privately underwritten (everywhere except Queensland and the NT), so many important protection measures have fallen by the wayside lately that the term 'insurance' seems a misnomer in the way you'd normally understand the word. *Not even a last resort*, page 22, explains why, but first here's how we got to this state of affairs.

INSURANCE MELTDOWN

The two largest private home warranty insurance schemes (in NSW and Victoria) are broadly similar and account for about 75% of the nation's home warranty insurance market.

In both states the government-run schemes were privatised in the mid 1990s. At the time, FAI, which was later bought by insurance giant HIH, was the major insurer of home warranty risk in Australia. Its collapse in March 2001, together with the attacks of September 11 and a downturn in international share markets, plunged the international insurance market into upheaval and in Australia left a large number of builders looking for insurance cover from a decreasing number of insurers.

To placate insurers and ensure builders could still obtain insurance, the state governments in Victoria and NSW agreed in 2002 to introduce some changes to the home warranty legislation, including making it 'last resort', raising the threshold for compulsory insurance, reducing the period of cover, excluding buildings above three storeys, and limiting maximum insurance payouts and cover.

By the end of 2002, only two companies were left that offered home warranty insurance for residential building work in NSW and Victoria: Vero (a subsidiary of the Promina Group), underwriting around 80% of the Australian market (in May 2004), and Australian International Insurance covering the rest. At the time of writing in May 2004, a new insurer, CGU (a member of the Insurance Australia Group), had just entered the market in NSW and Victoria.

PROBLEMS FOR BUILDERS ...

Many of the builders we spoke to who have small and medium-size businesses experienced a lot of problems during the past years of upheaval on the insurance market. They had to endure long delays while their applications for insurance eligibility were being processed and while this was going on were unable to build and earn a living.

The major insurer, Vero, admitted that there could have been delays after the HIH collapse, but emphasised that at the time of writing waiting periods had been reduced to less than 20 days on average for eligibility applications and less than 48 hours for project insurance once a builder's eligibility had been approved.

Another reason for resentment among the builders we spoke to was the strict financial tests the insurers introduced to establish eligibility for insurance. Under a 'last resort' scheme, an insurer carries very little risk, yet all projects they underwrite have to be backed up by sufficient capital from the builder. This capital is required to help prevent insolvencies, and if they do occur is used to settle the claim. If builders hold insufficient assets in their business, they have to provide a bank guarantee or pledge personal assets to cover any future claim.

... AND HOME OWNERS

The problems experienced with getting insurance didn't stop there. While waiting for insurance approval, builders' clients had to put their projects on hold, shelve their plans or get new quotes from builders with more assets who already had insurance — and then, possibly, accept more expensive contracts.

Unable to fulfil their insurer's financial tests, some smaller builders had to leave the industry or start working for larger building companies. This waning competition in the home renovation market is one factor that has driven up costs in recent years; higher insurance premiums are yet another. Home warranty insurance premiums have increased considerably over recent years. But at the time of writing, just before the third insurer entered the NSW and Victorian markets, Vero had introduced premium cuts and discounts of 5–30% and a simplified insurance product for small to medium-size builders.

Some of the exemptions in the mandatory insurance scheme can also spell problems for consumers. High-rise residential buildings (with more than three storeys) are exempt, so if you buy an apartment in a high-rise off-the-plan, check out the reputation of the builder or developer carefully and make sure your deposit is held in trust and only released on completion. If the high-rise was recently completed, your contract should have defect liability inclusions and include all necessary building certificates and inspection reports. You might also consider having a pre-purchase inspection done to identify possible problems and check out the owners' corporation or body corporate records if it's not brand new.

Owner-builder work, too, is exempt from the insurance requirement, unless the home is sold within six years, in which case owner-builders also need insurance. Builders claim this is being used as a loophole by those who can't get insurance to circumvent the requirement. Beware

HOW THE INSURANCE WORKS

The legislative requirements for home warranty insurance vary from state to state, but are broadly similar in the states where it's privately underwritten (everywhere except in Queensland and the NT). The requirements mentioned below and discussed elsewhere in this article are those that apply in NSW and Victoria, which together account for about 75% of the nation's home warranty insurance market.

- Home warranty insurance is compulsory — the builder has to have it and will charge you, perhaps indirectly, for the premium they pay. Builders have to take it out for residential building projects worth $12,000 or more.
- Before they commence work, builders must let home owners know the insurance company that'll underwrite home warranty risk — in NSW they must provide the original insurance certificate and in Victoria they have to provide the details in the contract.
- The insurance is valid for the construction period and six years afterwards, for structural defects.
- In all states except Queensland and the NT, it's a privately underwritten 'last resort' scheme, which means you can *only* make a claim if the builder has died, disappeared or become insolvent. This is a major disadvantage to the consumer — see *Not even a last resort*, page 22.
- The maximum amount you can claim for incomplete work is 20% of the contract value, with a $200,000 limit.
- Owner-builder work worth more than $12,000 is exempt from the insurance requirement, unless the home is sold within six years of completion.
- Buildings above three storeys are also exempt.

if a builder suggests you split contracts and take out an owner-builder licence, which means you take on the responsibility for the building or renovation work yourself.

NOT EVEN A LAST RESORT

The most recent of several government inquiries into home warranty insurance reported late last year that home owners in NSW were dissatisfied with the 'last resort' aspect of the insurance scheme and didn't understand its purpose. We're not surprised. While you (through the builder) have to pay for this compulsory insurance, in most states you can't just make a claim when something goes wrong. The insurance only kicks in when the builder has died, disappeared or become insolvent.

This clause isn't only unexpected and confusing for consumers, it makes a mockery of consumer protection, leaving you without insurance cover when the builder is still around but has failed to work to standard or complete the project. In such a case you're expected to use other avenues to recover your loss — directly from the builder or through the dispute resolution procedures of the NSW Home Building Service or Building Advice and Conciliation Victoria, consumer tribunals and the courts. So, many consumers are essentially uninsured against what they think they're insured against — incomplete or shoddy work — because of the 'last resort' clause.

INSURANCE QUEENSLAND-STYLE

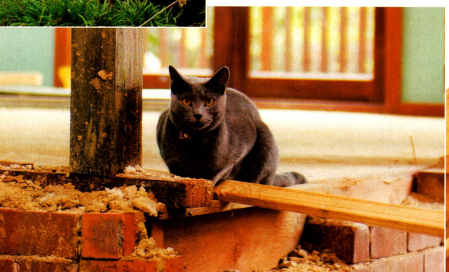
The problems discussed above concern those Australian states where home warranty insurance is privately underwritten — everywhere except Queensland and the NT. In the NT, only a limited form of home warranty insurance is mandatory and the Territory government underwrites the risk by default, so to speak, because insurance companies have shown no interest in the small market.

In Queensland, the government underwrites home warranty risk. The Building Services Authority (BSA) regulates the industry and has overall responsibility for licensing, dispute management and home warranty insurance. Unlike in other states, if builders fulfil the licensing requirements in Queensland, they'll automatically be able to get insurance: the BSA's licensing and insurance arms are linked. For the financial soundness test, builders have to provide proof that they have the financial capacity to continue to trade. But they *don't* have to provide a financial guarantee or pledge their assets, as insurers demand of builders in other states.

In recent years, Queensland's home warranty insurance premiums have been well below those in most other states. Some of the builders we spoke to in NSW and Victoria said the premiums they had to pay (before cuts and discounts were introduced in May) were around two to three times more than they'd be for a similar project in Queensland, where premiums are capped at $1280.

And for the lower premiums they have to pay, Queensland consumers get much more comprehensive insurance than people in other states. It's the only scheme in Australia that compensates for subsidence and settlement, and it's 'first resort' — you have access to the insurance if the builder fails to complete or rectify defective work, even if they're still trading.

The current privatised home warranty scheme as it operates in most Australian states appears to primarily benefit insurers and larger building companies at the expense of consumers and smaller builders. A Queensland-style system offers much higher levels of protection for consumers as well as being easy to access for builders. But if you live outside Queensland, there's very little you can do about this — short of moving to the sunshine state — except to lobby your local member to pressure the government to return to a state-run building services scheme that also underwrites home warranty risk. ■



PHOTOS: LIES ANDERSEN

Convenience herbs

Are ready-to-use herbs as good as fresh? To find out we took a snapshot look at two types of **GOURMET GARDEN** and **FRESHSHOT** convenience herbs, garlic and coriander, using a taste test to compare them with fresh herbs and the leading brands of dried and minced equivalents in jars. Garlic bread was tasted by 15 people and coriander cream cheese by 16. All samples were randomised for each taster, and tasted blind. Tasters ranked the herb samples according to how fresh each one tasted, and which one they liked best.

We found that the price tag of these convenience herbs (around $3.50 per 100 g) didn't guarantee they'd taste any fresher or better than the minced equivalent in jars (roughly $2 per 100 g), or even the dried version. In short:

- While it may not be so convenient, you can't beat the real thing — the fresh samples of both herbs came out top for freshness and preference.
- There was little to choose between **GOURMET GARDEN**, **FRESHSHOT** and minced garlic.
- Overall, **GOURMET GARDEN** coriander came a close second to fresh coriander for tasting fresh. **FRESHSHOT** coriander and the dried version didn't fare as well.

The added ingredients that convenience herbs contain could also influence your tastebuds. **FRESHSHOT** coriander, for example, contains vinegar, and the added dried glucose syrup in **GOURMET GARDEN** coriander could have given it the edge over **FRESHSHOT** and minced coriander for taste.

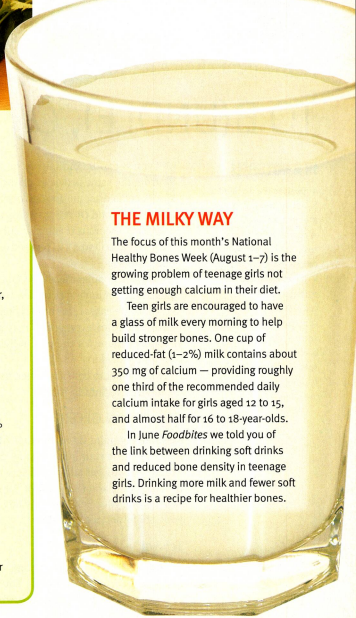
Also be aware of what you're getting for your money — **GOURMET GARDEN** contains only 55% garlic and 42% coriander, compared with 76% and 78% respectively in the minced versions that we tested. **FRESHSHOT** doesn't tell you how much herb it contains.

If you use herbs a lot and want the convenience of these ready-to-use varieties, it's worth experimenting with the different versions to see what you like. Alternatively try freezing small batches of fresh herbs in freezer bags or with water in ice trays.

Did you know?

Raw sugar may be less refined, but that doesn't make it a healthier, 'wholemeal' alternative to white sugar. In fact, nutritionally there's little difference between the two.

The size of the granules and the amount of molasses remaining on the crystal after refinement are the main differences that give each sugar its distinctive flavour and colour.



THE MILKY WAY

The focus of this month's National Healthy Bones Week (August 1–7) is the growing problem of teenage girls not getting enough calcium in their diet.

Teen girls are encouraged to have a glass of milk every morning to help build stronger bones. One cup of reduced-fat (1–2%) milk contains about 350 mg of calcium — providing roughly one third of the recommended daily calcium intake for girls aged 12 to 15, and almost half for 16 to 18-year-olds.

In June *Foodbites* we told you of the link between drinking soft drinks and reduced bone density in teenage girls. Drinking more milk and fewer soft drinks is a recipe for healthier bones.

Is 'bundling' your phone, internet access and/or pay TV the right choice for you?

TO B(UNDLE), *OR NOT TO B(UNDLE)?*

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Despite the discounts,** *bundling may not be the cheapest option — compare the phone costs in particular with other services to find out.*
- **If you make a lot** *of international calls, call rate caps to certain countries offered by some service providers can override any money you'd save on discounts from bundling (see* Compare the offers, *right).*

If you get your landline phone and internet access from the same provider, chances are you're offered a discount for one or both services. **TELSTRA** and **OPTUS** go a step further, and give additional discounts if you also subscribe to their pay TV (Foxtel and Optus TV, respectively) and/or mobile phone services.

For some people, these discounts and the convenience of having to deal with only one provider and (in some cases) receive only one bill may be worthwhile. However, others may be a lot better off shopping around for the best individual deals from different providers.

Here's what to consider when making the decision on whether to 'bundle' or not.

WHAT'S ON OFFER?

The starting point for all bundles (except **AUSTAR** — see right) is your home phone: discounts are available if you get additional services from the same provider. So if you think any of the discounts are worthwhile your first step may have to be changing your phone service provider.

Telstra

- Not all **TELSTRA**'s home phone plans qualify for the discounts. You need to get **HomeLine Plus, HomeLine Advanced** or **ISDN Home**.
- Discounts are available if you get one or more additional services from **TELSTRA**: internet access, mobile phone and/or Foxtel.
- In order to receive the discounts, you need to combine all your **TELSTRA** services, even your mobile, on one bill (except Bigpond cable and ADSL internet services).
- If you get one additional service you can choose between 50 free local calls, 50 free SMS, $15 worth of family calls (calls between the home phone and any mobiles on the same bill), or $15 worth of top-up for a prepaid mobile per month.
- For two or more additional services you can choose between 125 free local calls, 125 free SMS, $25 worth of family calls, or $25 worth of top-up for a prepaid mobile per month.
- These discounts were introduced in June 2004. Before that, **TELSTRA** offered 5% off your bill for the home phone plus one other service, and 10% off for the home phone plus two or more other services. If you're currently getting these discounts, you can continue to do so, or switch to the new discounts.

Optus

Discounts apply if you have your home phone with **OPTUS** plus:

- Dial-up or broadband internet: You get a discount on the monthly access fee (depending on the plan

you choose) plus 50 or 100 free local calls per month (depending on the local call plan you choose). There's also an installation discount for new broadband connections, but you have to enter into a 12-month contract.

- Optus TV: You get 50 or 100 free local calls per month (depending on the local call plan you choose) plus an installation discount for new pay TV connections (you have to enter into a 12-month contract).
- Mobile phone contracts (not prepaid): An extra $5 of call credit per month.
- Note: Only one lot of free local calls applies. For example, if you have your home phone and internet with **OPTUS**, you'll receive the free calls. Adding Optus TV won't give you any further free local calls.

Austar

- If you get your internet access from **AUSTAR** in addition to Austar TV, you'll get a discount on your monthly internet fee (depending on the plan you choose).

Other service providers

- A number of other telcos such as **ECOMTEL**, **GOTALK**, **IHUG** and **PRIMUS** offer free local calls or other discounts if you get both your home phone and internet services from them.

IS IT FOR YOU?

Whether bundling services is the right choice for you depends on your situation.

- Think whether you can fully use the discounts on offer. Getting 100 or more free local calls each month may sound great, but it won't help you that much if you only make a few dozen.
- Compare the offers in the bundle with those from other providers — especially the phone service, and in particular any cost caps offered for national and international calls, and calls to mobiles. You may find individual offers that are much better suited to your needs than bundled ones, saving you much more on your monthly costs than the discounts that come with the bundle — see *Compare the offers*, below, for an example.
- Receiving only one bill may be convenient. However, check with your provider whether this also means all your services could be disconnected if you have problems paying the bill. For example, **TELSTRA** says it "may terminate, suspend or cancel any one or all the services included in the single bill if a bill is not paid when it's due".
- If you live in a cabled area (check the providers' websites for which services are available in your postcode), you can not only get pay TV via cable, but also broadband internet and your home phone. But you may want to consider that if the cable gets damaged (above or below ground), you'll lose all your services (except your mobile) until it's fixed. ■

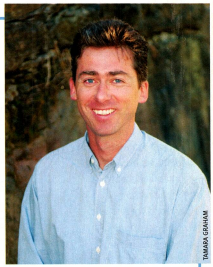
Compare the offers

Michael's currently using three different providers for his home phone, internet access and pay TV:

- **Home phone: AAPT** offers a $2.50 cap for international calls up to 30 minutes to a number of countries, including Germany. Michael spends about $25 a month on calls to family and friends in Germany. This includes, on average, about six half-hour calls per month plus a number of shorter calls. He makes about 70 local calls per month, with his average total bill coming in around $70.
- **Internet: He's on a 10-hours-per-month dial-up plan with OZEMAIL** for $14.95/month. He hasn't been keen to change providers, because he wants to avoid the hassle of a change of email address.
- **Pay TV: Michael subscribes to the basic entertainment pack from OPTUS** for $41.95/month.

Would he benefit from switching all his services to **OPTUS**?

- **Phone: A full comparison would have to take into account line** rental and all types of call rate. However, the main difference in Michael's case is international call costs. **OPTUS** has several plans with capped international call rates; a 30-minute call to Germany on the cheapest plan costs $8.20. For six such calls per month, this would add more than $30 to Michael's phone bill, easily wiping out any bundle discounts.


TAMARA GRAHAM

- **Internet: OPTUS** doesn't offer a 10-hours-per-month dial-up plan, only five or 20 hours per month. Michael would take the 20-hour plan for $14.45 at a $3.50 discount on the normal price — so he'd get ten extra hours of access for about the same amount he's paying now (but wouldn't necessarily take advantage of that). He'd also receive enough free local calls to cover all of his local calls, saving him about $10 per month.
- **Pay TV: There's no discount on the monthly fee.**

THE VERDICT

Financially, Michael's better off staying with his current home phone provider. However, without his international connection, bundling would make sense for him, although he wouldn't be likely to use the offered discounts to the full.

Who's winning the Appliance Olympics?

SAMARA EBRAHAM/ACQUEBY

It's the gold standard we're all looking for: brands with a good track record and appliances that won't break down.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **You can save yourself** *a lot of hassle by choosing a brand with a good reliability record.*
- **Reliability is only** *part of the picture — performance and after-sales service count for a lot as well.*

It can be the last thing you're thinking about when you're admiring a shiny, new appliance in a store, but what's really going to matter to you when you get it home is the answer to one simple question: will this go the distance and keep working through thick and thin?

Every couple of years CHOICE surveys subscribers about some of the big ticket appliances you rely on daily — the sort of items you don't think about much until they break down and you come home from a week away to find a fridge full of spoiled food or end up mopping the floor at midnight after the dishwasher has overflowed. This time we asked you about the reliability of your air conditioner, clothes dryer, dishwasher, DVD player, refrigerator, television, vacuum cleaner and washing machine.

The results varied widely. For some appliances — such as clothes dryers — the big brands are all reliable so when it comes to choosing between them you could pick on price, performance and features. But for other whitegoods, most notably dishwashers and washing machines, you also need to factor in a big 'R' for reliability, as real differences show up between brands.

Nor is price always your best guide: some expensive brands were no more reliable than their cheaper counterparts. But bagging a bargain isn't always better in the long run either, especially if the money saved upfront is rapidly chewed up by expensive repairs, poor service or difficulty locating parts. Indeed, one of the most notable findings from our survey was that things are bad enough when your appliance breaks down, but some companies only add insult to injury by providing poor or expensive after-sales service.

But reliability wasn't the sole criterion respondents based their brand loyalty on — the most reliable brand wasn't always the most popular and sometimes less reliable brands still attracted strong loyalty from their customers.

Clothes dryers

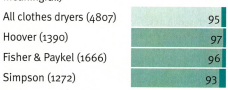
In the race for reliability gold, it was the humble clothes dryer that came out the winner, with 95% in our survey not requiring any repairs in the previous 12 months. In a market dominated by three big brands there was little variation in reliability between them, so when it comes to buying a new one, features and price could win on the day.

Clothes dryers also won gold for greatest loyalty — 92% of respondents indicated that they'd buy their brand again, a considerably higher number than for most other appliances in this survey.

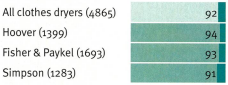
Given the overwhelming dominance of three brands in the market, there weren't great differences in brand loyalty, though **HOOVER** owners were more likely than average to buy again.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 2% or more between brands is meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Air conditioners

Nearly half of the CHOICE survey respondents owned an air conditioner: 64% had a split system, 22% a ducted system and 12% a wall/window unit. Ducted air conditioners were the most likely to have needed repair in the previous 12 months, with 18% having a service call compared to 10% of split systems and 5% of wall or window units.

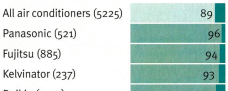
There was a considerable difference in form between brands: at the top, **PANASONIC**, **FUJITSU** and **KELVINATOR**, were significantly more reliable than **EMAILAIR** and **CARRIER**, at the bottom. Areas of concern for newer models were:

- Compressor: **CARRIER** (6%).
- Leaking gas: **CARRIER** (6%).

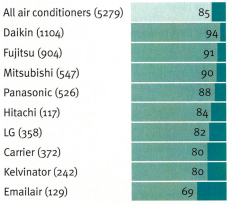
The most commonly owned brands in the survey — **DAIKIN**, **FUJITSU**, **MITSUBISHI** and **PANASONIC** — also inspired the greatest brand loyalty. Overall, noise stood out as the reason consumers wouldn't buy their brand again: 65% of **LG** and 63% of **KELVINATOR**'s dissatisfied respondents said the systems were too noisy.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 7% or more between brands is meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Our survey

We sent our reliability questionnaire to nearly 60,000 randomly selected CHOICE subscribers and received more than 16,000 responses, giving us a response rate of 27%.

For each of the eight surveyed appliances we asked: what brand you bought and when you bought it; whether it had needed repair in the previous 12 months; what the problems were; whether you'd buy the brand again; and if not, what the reasons were.

We calculated the repair percentages only on appliances up to eight years old and we've age-adjusted the figures to be fair to each brand. For greater statistical confidence, brands with fewer than 100 responses were excluded from this analysis — except for DVDs, where the cut-off was 50.

HOW TO READ THIS REPORT

- The overall average is in the top row of each list, then brands are shown in descending order. The number of responses for each brand is noted in brackets.
- When we list the most common problems with products, this information only applies to appliances up to three years old (bought post 2000) — referred to as 'newer' models — and includes all problems reported, not just repairs.
- When we say "A difference of x% or more between brands is meaningful", this means we had enough responses to be statistically confident that differences of "x% or more" weren't caused by chance.
- Reasons given for a lack of brand loyalty reflect what was reported by those respondents who said they wouldn't buy a brand again, not by all owners of that brand.

WHAT ABOUT...?

- If your appliance brand isn't listed in this survey it's mostly because we didn't have a large enough sample size to accurately report on it.
- If the appliance you're interested in isn't covered this year, take a look back at our last survey in CHOICE, August 2002, which included microwaves; and the survey before, in March 2000 which looked at VCRs.

Televisions

Televisions were the silver medallists in the race for reliability, 93% not having needed any repairs in the previous 12 months. The trend is to larger screens: almost half the respondents owned televisions with screens between 60 and 68 cm and another quarter had screens bigger than 68 cm. But bigger size can equal more problems, and people with screens over 80 cm were the most likely to have problems with the picture.

While TV technology and formats are changing fast, only 8% of respondents had switched to a new flat widescreen and only around 4% had the newest types of screens of all — plasma, rear projection or LCD. While these don't have much reliability history, so far the type of screen seems to make little significant difference to a television's overall reliability.

Problem areas for newer models were:

- Picture: **GRUNDIG** (11%), **TEAC** (10%).
- Sound: **TEAC** (6%), **SAMSUNG** (5%).

With reliability good for most TVs, it was performance and after-sales service that mostly motivated respondents' loyalty: 50% of people who wouldn't buy a **TEAC** again cited poor performance as their main concern, while service problems dogged **GRUNDIG**: 25% who wouldn't be back said they had difficulty getting service, 19% cited poor service and 25% said the brand was expensive to repair.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 9% or more between brands is meaningful.)

All televisions (10,529)	93
Palsonic (169)	98
Hitachi (166)	96
LG (959)	96
Panasonic (1845)	96
Sony (1968)	96
Sanyo (253)	95
Philips (855)	94
Sharp (585)	94
JVC (165)	93
NEC (595)	93
Samsung (560)	92
Akai (265)	90
Toshiba (119)	88
Teac (557)	85
Loewe (366)	84
Grundig (187)	82

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

All televisions (10,579)	88
Sony (1997)	95
Panasonic (1868)	94
Loewe (368)	92
LG (962)	91
Toshiba (119)	90
Hitachi (162)	89
Philips (855)	89
Sanyo (250)	89
Sharp (577)	88
NEC (596)	85
JVC (167)	84
Samsung (561)	82
Grundig (191)	79
Palsonic (172)	77
Akai (262)	74
Teac (559)	71

Dishwashers

With 15% needing repairs in the previous 12 months, dishwashers tied with washing machines for last place as the least reliable appliance in the survey.

Dishwashers presented an uneven field, with considerable variation between brands when it came to reliability. Specific problems with newer models were:

- Baskets and racks: **KLEENMAID** (9%).
- Door: **DISHLEX** (7%).
- Controls and switches: **FISHER & PAYKEL** (7%).
- Detergent dispenser: **DISHLEX** (4%).
- Leakage: **WESTINGHOUSE** (4%) and **FISHER & PAYKEL** (4%).
- Noise: **WESTINGHOUSE** (4%).

The three top-rating brands — **BOSCH**,

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

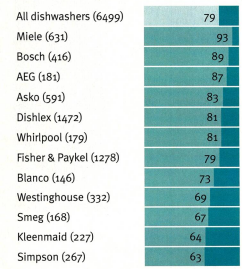
(A difference of 7% or more between brands is meaningful.)

All dishwashers (6466)	85
Bosch (409)	92
Miele (628)	92
AEG (179)	90
Blanco (147)	89
Simpson (268)	89
Dishlex (1463)	86
Whirlpool (181)	86
Kleenmaid (225)	85
Westinghouse (331)	85
Asko (592)	81
Smeg (168)	80
Fisher & Paykel (1273)	79

MIELE, AEG — were also the top three scorers in the buy-again stakes. The brand at the bottom of the reliability table, **FISHER & PAYKEL**, had the most dissatisfied subscribers complain they broke down too often, with others adding that the brand was expensive to repair and service.

Of consumers who said they wouldn't buy a brand again, poor wash performance was singled out most frequently, followed by noise, poor drying performance and breaking down too often. For **SIMPSON**, which attracted least support in the buy-again stakes, 54% of unhappy customers said they wouldn't be back because of the machine's noise.

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



DVD players

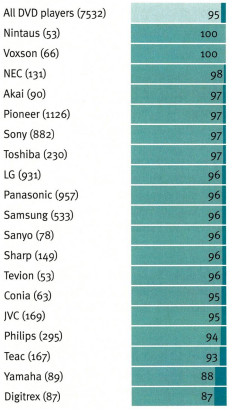
DVD players have moved from novelty to must-have in a very short space of time — almost 60% of survey respondents owned one, compared to just 20% two years ago. There's also a huge range to choose between — respondents listed 57 different brands of DVD players.

Because DVD players are such a new appliance their overall reliability can't be directly compared to other appliances yet. Still, so far they're proving pretty reliable, with 95% of owners in our survey having no problems the past year. Of the brands we could analyse, **DIGITREX** and **YAMAHA** lagged behind the rest for reliability over the past 12 months.

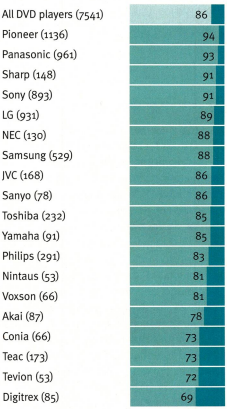
Sample sizes were too small to comment on customer loyalty for many brands. But of the brands with a large market share in our survey, despite their relatively high buy-again ratings, brickbats were given for poor performance by 55% of disgruntled **SAMSUNG** customers, inconvenience of use by 32% of unhappy **LG** owners and too many breakdowns by 28% of **PANASONIC** customers who said they wouldn't buy again.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 10% or more between brands is meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



Tips when buying

- Use our reliability results when buying — a bargain isn't a bargain if you're likely to be paying for a lot of repairs.
- Ask about the servicing arrangements if something goes wrong, especially if you live outside a metropolitan area — you don't want to have to ship your fridge halfway across the country to get it fixed.
- If you're buying a brand manufactured overseas, check whether spare parts are readily available in Australia.
- As soon as you bring a new appliance home, staple the docket, warranty and manual together and put them in an 'appliance file'.
- If your appliance breaks down after its warranty has expired you may still have statutory rights. These are called 'implied warranty rights' and mean manufacturers must provide goods of 'merchantable quality' that meet the basic level of quality and performance expected for their price and description. So, for instance, if your expensive television breaks down just after the end of its written warranty, you may still be entitled to a refund or repair.

EXPENSIVE LIGHT BULBS

When Flavio 'Fred' Venturini of Noosa bought his fridge, he wasn't told it was made in the US. The fridge ran perfectly well, but when the light globe blew, Fred tried several new 40 W bulbs with no success.

Eventually he looked at the ratings plate on the back of the fridge and discovered it had a 120 V (US) rating, with a fitted transformer reducing the Australian 240 V so the fridge would work.

"I went back to the retailer expecting to get some replacement globes," says Fred. "No such luck. The globes had to be ordered via Melbourne. When they arrived a week later, the next surprise was in store. Australian 40 W globes cost 80 cents to $1. These globes made in America cost $15 each. I'd ordered three globes and nearly fell over backwards when asked for $45."

Washing machines

Washing machines tied equal last with dishwashers for reliability, 15% having needed repairs in the previous 12 months. Top-loading machines proved slightly more reliable, 14% needing repairs during the year compared to 18% of front loaders. The latter were owned by one third of respondents, up from our last survey so it seems subscribers are becoming convinced by front loaders' consistently better performance and water-saving in our tests.

There were significant differences in reliability between brands, 30% separating top performer **MIELE** from lowest-rating **BENDIX**. More than a third of all **BENDIX** owners had to call in the repairer in the previous year, as had around a quarter of **ARISTON** owners.

Subscribers highlighted the following problems for newer models:

- Electronic circuits: **BENDIX** (16%), **FISHER & PAYKEL** (4%).
- Belts: **BENDIX** (13%), **KLEENMAID** (6%), **ARISTON** (4%).
- Out of balance: **KLEENMAID** (9%), **SIMPSON** (7%), **HOOVER** (7%).
- Program selector: **BENDIX** (9%).

Consumer loyalty was affected by washing performance, noise, difficulties getting repairs and the expense of service.

Some manufacturers handicapped themselves with a double hit — poor reliability *and* poor service. Already low on the reliability table:

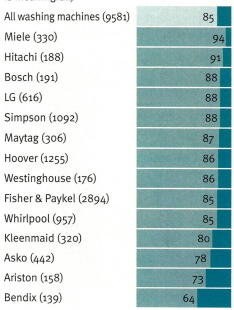
- Of those who wouldn't buy another **BENDIX**, 41% said the brand broke down too often, 30% cited the expense of repairs and 13% had difficulties getting service. Not surprising given *Bendix bad news continues*, below.
- Of those who wouldn't buy **ARISTON** again, 35% highlighted breakdown problems and 15% cited poor service.

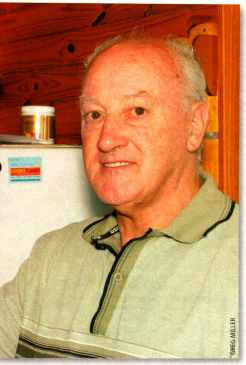
BENDIX BAD NEWS CONTINUES

As we reported in CHOICE, May 2003, **BENDIX** is no longer distributed in Australia. That can be bad news if you need repairs done under warranty because retailers aren't always able to honour the warranty. But **BENDIX** parts are still available and if your retailer can't source them, call Dom Tech Appliances in Melbourne on (03) 9872 6850 or BT Appliance Sales and Service in Sydney on (02) 9319 5099.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 8% or more between brands is meaningful.)




CRAIG MILLER

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

All washing machines (9650)	83
Miele (333)	96
Bosch (196)	88
Asko (445)	87
Simpson (1097)	86
Westinghouse (175)	86
Fisher & Paykel (2915)	85
Hitachi (189)	85
LG (620)	85
Hoover (1269)	81
Maytag (308)	81
Whirlpool (966)	80
Kleenmaid (321)	77
Ariston (160)	67
Bendix (140)	51

Vacuum cleaners

Vacuum cleaners come in three main types: barrel/canister (owned by 72% of survey respondents); upright (20%) and ducted (throughout the house) systems (5%).

Despite an overall reliability of 90%, vacuum cleaner owners reported a large range of problems. Of newer machines, problem areas by brand were:

- **SANYO**: poor suction (13%), hoses (13%), heads, brushes, beaters (10%), blocked suction (9%), wands (9%).
- **KAMBROOK**: poor suction (11%), dust bags (8%), dust indicators (6%), filters (5%).
- **DYSON**: heads, brushes, beaters (8%), cord retraction (5%).
- **HOOVER**: drive belt (8%), blocked suction (7%), cord retraction (6%).
- **VOLTA**: poor suction (8%), wands (6%), dust indicators (6%), dust bags (5%).
- **WERTHEIM**: heads, brushes, beaters (8%), drive belt (7%), switches and controls (4%).
- **NILFISK**: dust bags (6%).
- **LG**: dust indicator (5%).
- **ELECTROLUX**: filters (4%).

Overall, vacuum cleaner owners were the least likely of all appliance owners to buy their brand again. Respondents mostly

ANTHONY SAUERS

disqualified brands for poor performance, inconvenience of use, poor features and noise.

Perhaps surprisingly for a brand that is expensive to buy, poor service saw **KIRBY** rated at the bottom of the table in the return game: 22% of dissatisfied owners said they had difficulty getting service, 28% that it was expensive to repair and service and 15% that they'd had difficulty getting parts.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

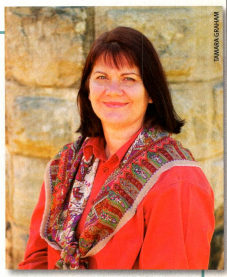
(A difference of 7% or more between brands is meaningful.)

All vacuum cleaners (9549)	90
Panasonic (654)	95
Hitachi (143)	94
Miele (679)	94
Nilfisk (677)	94
Kambrook (210)	93
Electrolux (805)	92
Kirby (144)	92
Hoover (1067)	91
LG (311)	91
Dyson (991)	89
Sanyo (399)	89
Vax (355)	88
Volta (940)	81
Wertheim (902)	79

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

All vacuum cleaners (9566)	73
Dyson (966)	87
Miele (670)	87
Nilfisk (682)	85
Electrolux (809)	78
Vax (353)	75
Panasonic (648)	73
Hoover (1075)	71
Hitachi (143)	70
LG (315)	70
Volta (938)	68
Wertheim (901)	67
Kambrook (212)	64
Sanyo (403)	57
Kirby (147)	54

AN OLD NEW FRIDGE ...


TAMARA GRAHAM

Christine Davis (not her real name) lives in a small country town on the NSW mid-north coast and so, she says, "Service availability for everything is difficult.

"When my old **KELVINATOR** fridge broke down in 2003 we bought a new **KELVINATOR**. Five days later, my brand-new fridge broke down, leaking all the gas out.

"On the following Monday we talked to the service provider, **ELECTROLUX**, whose offer was to fix it (I wanted another fridge). **ELECTROLUX** sent a serviceman the same day who did temporary repairs, though by then the food was spoiled and had to be thrown out.

"The serviceman returned two days later and worked on it, welding, recharging and regassing it. This isn't what one expects to happen to a brand-new, five-day-old appliance! I feel somewhat cheated and that I have an 'old' repaired fridge now," Christine says.

Statutory warranty rights mean that you're entitled to a refund, repair or replacement when an appliance malfunctions. Which one it will be is subject to negotiation between you and the retailer. When we contacted ***ELECTROLUX****, it said that express (written) warranties for* ***KELVINATOR*** *refrigerators cover defective materials and workmanship for a period of two years from the date of purchase, plus a further three years on the sealed system.*

"Unfortunately components sometimes fail and we do our best to rectify the problem as quickly as possible with the least inconvenience to our customers." It stressed that where frozen food has spoiled due to a malfunction, the warranty provides for reimbursement of some of the cost (Christine was compensated). It also noted that for regional areas, sometimes it's quicker to repair a refrigerator than to bring in a replacement.

Fridges

CHOICE subscribers like their fridges big: three quarters of respondents listed theirs as being 400 L or more. Most fridges were reasonably reliable — only 10% required repairs over the previous 12 months. But there's a reliability sliding scale here: only 7% of fridges under 300 L needed repairs, but the biggest — models over 500 L — had 13% requiring repair during the year.

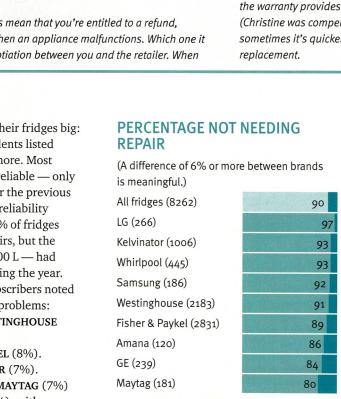
For newer models, subscribers noted the following significant problems:

- Icing up of food: **WESTINGHOUSE** (9%).
- Noise: **FISHER & PAYKEL** (8%).
- Door seal: **KELVINATOR** (7%).
- Handles and fittings: **MAYTAG** (7%) and **FISHER & PAYKEL** (4%), with 5% of the latter brand's owners also nominating shelves as a problem.

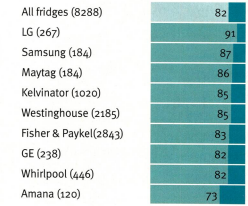
With the notable exception of top-rating **LG**, brand loyalty didn't follow reliability. Even relatively high buy-again- rating **KELVINATOR** and **WESTINGHOUSE** were marked down for poor performance by people who wouldn't buy the brand again, while **WHIRLPOOL** lost points from its dissatisfied customers because of poor features and being inconvenient to use.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

(A difference of 6% or more between brands is meaningful.)



PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN



SARWEE MOSTAFA

Safe sleeping

We tested baby monitors to find the ones most likely to provide peace of mind.

You've finally got your baby to sleep, giving you some precious moments to get something else done — clean that pile of dishes in the sink, hang washing on the line or perhaps even relax with a cuppa and chat on the phone with friends. You make sure the baby monitor receiver is in a place where you can hear and see it, or clip it onto your belt and go outside. But can you rest assured that this will alert you when your baby wakes or becomes unsettled?

We tested nine baby monitors that primarily detect sound and found them to be mostly pretty good, although there were a few differences that separated the best (see *What to buy*, right) from the rest (see *What about the rest?*, page 34).

A CRY IN THE DARK

The sensitivity of the microphones in most of the monitors we looked at was exceptionally good, so they should detect the slightest sound made by a baby. The **KIDDICALL** and **PHILIPS** models needed a slightly louder noise to activate the monitor, but while they may not detect restlessness, they'd almost certainly detect a crying baby.

All of the monitors have good range — you can be at least a couple of rooms away with the receiver and still be alerted if your baby makes a noise. In our test this was from 100 m up to an excellent 300 m, but this may vary depending on your surroundings (wall thickness, open spaces etc). Generally, the monitors' volume and quality of sound output were also good.

None of the monitors tested have any potentially dangerous parts, and they all passed the requirements of the relevant safety Standard — although the **BABYCOM** and **TOMY** weren't quite as robust as the other models, showing some damage after our drop test.

On the downside, although monitors are used for babies some manufacturers seemed to forget that they're used *by* adults. Many of the ones we looked at had small switches, making them a bit fiddly to use.

IN A NUTSHELL

All of the baby monitors *in our test performed well, allowing you to be responsive to a baby when you're in another room, or even outside.*

Although they can *provide reassurance, baby monitors do have limitations, so don't regard them as a failsafe babysitter.*

WHAT TO BUY

These three monitors had the best scores overall.

TOMY Sleepy Friends A221226	$139
PHILIPS SBC SC365	$150
ROGER ARMSTRONG Sleep Easy 618	$100

CAN BABY MONITORS REDUCE THE RISK OF SIDS?

In a word, no. Baby monitors, such as those we tested, are mainly for reassurance, or (in the case of special breathing and heartbeat monitors) for babies who require intensive monitoring at home for some serious illness.

The reduction in the numbers of babies dying of SIDS has come about because parents have been made aware of the childcare practices that reduce the risk — put your baby on their back to sleep, make sure their face is uncovered when sleeping and keep them away from cigarette smoke.

Brand / model* (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Ease of use score (%)	3 Performance score (%)	FEATURES Receiver shows transmitter is off	Low battery indicator	Out of range indicator	Mute switc
TOMY Sleepy Friends (Winnie the Pooh) A221226	77	70	80	✓ (A)			✓
PHILIPS SBC SC365	74	70	76	✓	✓	✓	
ROGER ARMSTRONG Sleep Easy 618	73	60	78	✓ (A)		✓	
KIDDICALL L7610	71	60	76				
LINDAM Baby Talk LD9REU	71	50	80	✓ (A)			✓
STEELCRAFT Digital BC2000	71	60	76	✓	✓	✓	✓ (B)
ANGELCARE AC200	70	60	74		✓		
BABYCOM Advanced 15301	70	70	70	✓			
LOVE N CARE Ultra-Lite 9920	67	60	70	✓ (A)			

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled here in rank order. Prices are recommended retail, unless specified otherwise, as provided by manufacturers in May 2004.

TOMY SLEEPY FRIENDS (WINNIE THE POOH) A221226

Price: $139

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent range.
- Excellent sensitivity to noise.
- Very good volume.
- Very good clarity of sound.
- Equal best score for performance

BAD POINTS

- Not as robust as others, it started to come apart during our drop test.

PHILIPS SBC SC365

Price: $150

GOOD POINTS

- Very good range.
- Good sensitivity to noise.
- Sensitivity of sound indicator lights is good, (see *What to look for*, right).
- Very good volume.
- Very good clarity of sound.

BAD POINTS

- None noted.

ROGER ARMSTRONG SLEEP EASY 618

Price: $100 (ARP)

GOOD POINTS

- Good range.
- Excellent sensitivity to noise.
- Sensitivity of sound indicator lights is good.
- Excellent volume.
- Good clarity of sound.

BAD POINTS

- None noted.

PROFILES: TAMARA GRAHAM

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The others still worked well and would satisfy most people wanting to monitor their baby. In most cases the range, sensitivity to noise, volume and sound clarity was rated as good or better by our expert tester. But a few negatives about some of the models are worth pointing out:

- The **ANGELCARE** monitor ratings were good overall, but it doesn't have a transmitter-off indicator (see *What to look for*, below).
- Although it was easy to operate, the **BABYCOM** sound indicator lights weren't very sensitive (see *What to look for*). It also wasn't as robust as the others: the aerial cover broke off during our drop test.
- Using a hairdryer causes a large amount of static to be heard over the **KIDDICALL** receiver, and it doesn't indicate when the transmitter is off.
- Where power supplies on other models are designed to prevent mis-connection, those for the **LINDAM** can accidentally be connected to the wrong unit. There's a label to indicate the correct connection, but this could easily come off.
- The sound indicator lights on the **LOVE N CARE** monitor weren't very sensitive, and its power indicator light was difficult to see in daylight. It's also hard to fit the battery and close the cover.
- Some people may find the numerous functions, the display

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

For the most effective, reliable and versatile baby monitor, look for the following features:

ON THE TRANSMITTER (BABY UNIT):

- Mains and battery operation, if you want to use it in areas without mains power (say, out camping or having a picnic).
- A night-light.

ON THE RECEIVER (PARENT UNIT):

- Mains and battery operation, so you can use the unit both in and outside the house, and walk around with it on your person.
- A belt clip.
- Volume control.
- A light that indicates when the transmitter isn't turned on.
- Sound indicator lights — if you want to see the noise your baby makes rather than hear it. This is particularly useful if you're talking on the phone or to visitors, if you have (or your babysitter has) problems with

SPECIFICATIONS

Microphone sensitivity control	Sound indicator lights	Night light	Plays a lullaby	Belt clip on receiver	Motion detector	Battery operated**	Origin	Warranty (months)	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($) †
	✓	✓ (D)	✓ (D)	✓		✓ (J)	China	6	Funtastic	139
	✓			✓		✓ (K)	China	12	Childcare Nursery Products	150
	✓	✓		✓		✓ (L)	China	12	Roger Armstrong	100 (M)
	✓			✓ (G)		✓ (K)	China	12	Dick Smith Electronics / Tandy Electronics	100
	✓			(H)		✓ (K)	China	12	Bilbo Trading	110 (M)
	✓ (C)	✓ (E)		✓	✓	✓ (K)	China	12	Britax Childcare	70
	✓					✓	China	12	Valiant Enterprises	110
	✓	✓ (D)				✓	China	12	Southern Model Supplies	100
	✓	✓ (F)		✓		✓ (J)	China	12	Love N Care	69

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and the alarms on the **STEELCRAFT** — the only digital model in our sample — a little confusing (see above). Also, its sound indicator lights aren't very sensitive and are difficult to see. It does have some additional features, including a temperature alarm. You can set a temperature range and if the baby's room temperature varies outside this range by more than 2°C the receiver sounds an alarm and shows the temperature alert icon.

** All models have power-on indicators on both units, two frequency channels and volume control on the receiver.*

*** All models will run off 240V mains electricity.*

† Prices are recommended retail, unless stated otherwise, as provided by manufacturers in May 2004.

(A) *Doesn't have a separate indicator light, but all lights come on and/or it makes a static noise so you know the transmitter is off.*

(B) *For temperature change and motion detector alarms only. Mute lasts for 2 minutes.*

(C) *A series of indicators on the LCD (not as visible as the lights on other models).*

(D) *Can be turned on permanently or has a 5 minute timer.*

(E) *Can be turned on permanently or set so that it comes on whenever a sound is detected and automatically turns off 30 secs after sound stops.*

(F) *Can be turned on permanently or has an auto-sensor which turns it on when it gets dark and off when it gets light.*

(G) *Belt clip on both units.*

(H) *No belt clip, although the manufacturer told us that the handle can double as one.*

(J) *Receiver only.*

(K) *Both units; rechargeable batteries supplied for receiver.*

(L) *Receiver only; rechargeable batteries supplied.*

(M) *Average retail price.*

1 Overall score

The overall score was made up as follows:

- Ease of use: 30%
- Performance: 70%

2 Ease of use

Our expert assessed the monitors' switches and controls, along with ease of using the battery compartment and connecting the power supplies.

3 Performance

The following aspects of performance were weighted equally:

- Range — the distance between monitor and receiver where sound is still heard.
- Sensitivity (sound) — the lowest level of noise required at the transmitter to be heard through the receiver.
- Sensitivity (lights) — the lowest level of noise required at the transmitter to activate the sound indicator display lights on the receiver.
- Sound output — the maximum volume of the receiver.
- Sound clarity — how clearly the sound could be heard without background noise (static).

hearing, or if there's background noise such as the TV or vacuum cleaner for example.

ON BOTH UNITS:

- At least two different frequencies to choose from.
- A cord long enough for your set-up.
- Power-on indicator light.
- Battery condition indicator.
- Automatic battery back-up — useful in areas where power failures are common.

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Big Brother is watching

In addition to the sound monitors listed in the table, we took a look at the **SWANN Guardian Angel Wireless Baby Monitoring Kit** (RRP $199). It consists of a camera that monitors the child and relays the images to a five-inch black and white TV screen. It even has infrared sensors and displays a reasonable picture with the camera set at up to about one metre from the baby in a totally darkened room.

Although the image at both short and long distances is excellent and the volume very good, the sound clarity is poor, with lots of static at all but the lowest settings. Night-time monitoring in particular could be a problem, as a baby crying might not wake you up — particularly with the unit set to a lower volume to avoid static noises. In addition, a microwave oven can also cause interference to the picture.

Compared to the other monitors we tested, the **SWANN** isn't as versatile — it can't run from batteries so it's certainly less portable. Unless you specifically want the picture, you'll probably benefit more from one of the other monitors.

Goodbye and good riddance

If you have acne, you don't have to put up with it — effective treatments are available.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Some big-name acne** *treatments don't contain particularly effective active ingredients and won't help much at all.*
- **To control mild** *to moderate outbreaks of acne, first try a product containing benzoyl peroxide.*
- **For severe acne,** *consult your doctor or a dermatologist. A range of effective treatments is available, and a combination of prescription and non-prescription products may be your best bet.*

Zit-man washes his face twice a day with a popular medicated face wash — one that claims to fight acne. But the pimples keep coming and the unfortunate teenager is stuck with his cruel nickname. There could be several reasons for the never-say-die acne, but the likely one is that the product doesn't work.

Many acne treatments contain an antibacterial agent called triclosan. While it's good at killing surface bacteria (you'll also find it in some toothpastes and soaps), it won't reach the bacteria in your pores. In fact, a recent review of medical research found no evidence that triclosan's an effective acne treatment.

That's bad news for anyone who's spent a lot of money on such products. The good news is that whether you suffer from occasional blackheads, troublesome pimples or severe inflammatory acne, there are plenty of products that *will* help.

WHAT IS ACNE?

Everyone's skin produces sebum, an oily substance made by the sebaceous glands. Sebum moisturises your skin, and helps maintain a healthy bacterial population on the skin's surface.

During adolescence, surges of the male hormone androgen (which females have too) cause the skin to produce more sebum than usual and the cells of the sebaceous follicles seem to get stickier. The sticky cells block the skin's pores and the sebum can't get out.

If the blockage stays below the skin you get a whitehead. But when the sebum reaches the air it turns dark and becomes a blackhead. The dark colouring isn't dirt, it's just the pigment in the sebum. Whiteheads and blackheads are called comedonal acne.

Sometimes bacteria, called *Propionbacterium acnes*, get into the surrounding tissue, causing it to become inflamed. Inflammatory acne can be small red bumps (papules), white or yellow pus-filled pimples (pustules) or large red bumps (inflamed nodules).

Around 90% of boys and 80% of girls get teenage acne to varying degrees. It typically starts just before puberty and mainly affects the face, upper back and chest. Acne usually becomes less of a problem after the age of 25.

Hormones aren't the only problem. Acne can also be caused or aggravated by oil-based cosmetics, harsh cleansing and some medications (for example steroids). And vigorous scrubbing won't help — in fact, if you wash and scrub too vigorously, or use abrasive products, you'll irritate the skin and make the acne worse. There also seems to be a genetic link.

Finally, it's important to recognise that acne isn't just a cosmetic disease. It not only affects your looks, but can affect self-esteem and social

SIMON BOSCH

interactions. Acne can have a negative effect on young people's quality of life, and successful treatment can improve their overall wellbeing.

OVER-THE-COUNTER RELIEF

There are a few things to consider when buying and using acne treatments:

- Acne treatments won't get rid of existing pimples — rather, they help prevent new ones. This means using the treatment even when your skin's looking good, and spreading it over the entire affected area (not just existing spots).
- Give it time: acne treatments usually take a while to kick in (anything up to six to eight weeks), so if you give up too soon you won't know if they work.
- What works for your friends may not work for you — and vice versa.
- Your acne may have cleared up of its own accord, not because of the product you're using (especially if it miraculously clears up the next day). Obviously if the treatment continues to be effective, that's a different story.
- If you have a reaction to a particular product, it could be an allergy to one of the ingredients (such as the preservative used), an interaction with something else you're using or a result of overusing the product.

Topical medications

A 'topical' treatment is one you apply directly to the affected area — in this case, areas prone to blackheads and pimples. Topical acne treatments come as creams, gels, ointments and washes.

Antiseptics such as benzoyl peroxide stop the growth of bacteria and some, but not all, are designed to clean your skin right down into the pores. You don't need a prescription to buy them.

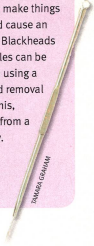
- One of the most effective ingredients is **benzoyl peroxide**. It's safe for use by adults and children and can be used during pregnancy. However, it can dry and irritate the skin. Products vary in concentration and accompanying ingredients, so you might need to experiment to find one that suits you.
- **Sulphur, salicylic acid, resorcinol** and **azelaic acid** help unblock pores. Salicylic acid may dry the skin, but azelaic acid and resorcinol have no notable side effects. Sulphur, an old-fashioned remedy, can be unpleasant to use at higher, more effective concentrations.
- Topical **vitamin A, tea tree oil** and **zinc supplements** may help relieve acne. However, there's no strong evidence that other claimed alternative remedies — such as echinacea,

HOW TO LOOK AFTER YOUR SKIN

- Wash your face twice a day with water and a mild soap or cleanser, and pat it dry.
- Use oil-free or 'noncomedogenic' skin-care products and make-up.
- Apply acne treatments all over the affected area, not just on the spots.
- If you have acne on your back or chest, wear loose clothing.
- If you want to remove blackheads, use a proper tool (see page 38). Don't squeeze or pop pimples — it can damage the skin and cause infection and scarring when sebum, bacteria and shed skin cells are pushed into the surrounding tissue.

THE BLACKHEAD REMOVAL TOOL

Yes, you can remove blackheads — but not by squeezing them out with your fingers. This could just make things worse and cause an infection. Blackheads and pimples can be dealt with using a blackhead removal tool like this, available from a pharmacy.



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acupuncture, calendula or yoga — have any benefit.

Triclosan and **cetrimide** are antiseptics found in some acne treatments (especially washes) but there's no evidence they work to prevent acne.

PRESCRIPTION RELIEF

If moderate or severe acne doesn't improve, it's worth seeing a doctor or a dermatologist. There's a range of effective oral and topical treatments they can prescribe — sometimes a combination of both may work best.

Topical creams and gels

First choice for many will be **topical retinoids**: tretinoin, isotretinoin and adapalene. These are widely regarded as the best external medication available to treat whiteheads and blackheads and prevent the formation of new ones. They're based on vitamin A and cause the skin to peel, unblocking your pores. They may not be safe for pregnant women.

Retinoids can irritate the skin and increase its sensitivity to the sun, so you're usually advised to apply them at night. A sunscreen is also recommended — at least SPF 15+ and containing a physical blocker, such as titanium dioxide — to reduce the risk of UV damage and skin cancer. Gel-based sunscreens are probably best for people with acne, as creams might aggravate it. As well, keep out of the midday sun and avoid sunlamps and tanning beds.

Topical antibiotics work by reducing bacteria on the skin and in the pores. They're useful for mild to moderate inflammatory acne but may not be so effective on blackheads. However, overuse of antibiotics in general has led to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, causing a rethink on their role in acne treatment.

Topical antibiotics include **clindamycin** and **erythromycin**. They may cause dry or scaly skin and erythromycin may also give an itching, stinging or burning feeling, but there are no other notable side effects.

Oral antibiotics

These are becoming very popular and work well for moderate acne, especially if you have inflamed and painful pimples. However, they're not a magic bullet. You should notice a marked decline in the severity of your acne, but it may not disappear altogether.

Oral antibiotics include **doxycycline, tetracycline** and **erythromycin**. All oral antibiotics can cause stomach upsets, and some aren't suitable for pregnant women. Doxycycline can make people more sensitive to sunlight and easily sunburnt. **Minocycline** is also widely used, but it can have side effects including dizziness, light-headedness and vertigo.

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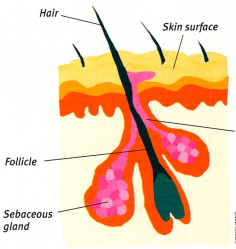


CONSUMER

Antibiotics can fail, although it may be because they've not been taken as directed, rather than problems with the medicine itself. You need to follow the instructions carefully and keep going to the end of the course — even if your symptoms have disappeared, or you think they're *never* going to disappear. There's also the problem of the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria — see *Topical antibiotics*, left, for more.

Sometimes a combination of treatments works best. Some studies suggest that combining a topical antiseptic like benzoyl peroxide with an oral antibiotic can give better results than either used alone. Talk to your doctor.

Hormonal treatment

One of the more common treatments for acne in girls and young women is oral contraception. Contraceptive pills decrease the effect of male hormones, which in turn means a decrease in the production of sebum.

Effective for reducing acne are **DIANE 35** and **BRENDA 35**, both of which contain **cyproterone acetate** and oestrogen. The former has an anti-androgenic effect, and is often used to treat problems

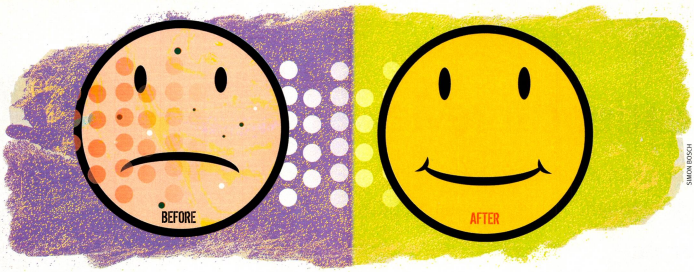
The Roaccutane debate

Thousands of young Australians have used oral anti-acne drugs containing the active ingredient isotretinoin. They're branded **ROACCUTANE, ORATANE, ISOHEXAL** and **ACCURE**. Isotretinoin is an effective treatment for severe acne and treatment failure is uncommon. The effects can last long after you stop taking the drug, and there can also be severe side effects.

BIRTH DEFECTS

Women who take the drug during pregnancy have a very high risk (30–40%) of serious birth defects in their baby. The main effects are on the heart, brain and ear.

For this reason, doctors will want to rule out any possibility of pregnancy before treatment begins.



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caused by androgens, such as acne, hirsutism and female-pattern baldness. Other so-called second and third-generation contraceptives are also effective at reducing acne — ask your doctor about them.

If you use oral contraceptives to treat acne, your doctor should explain the risk of blood clots — and cyproterone acetate may increase the risk more than some other contraceptive pills.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS...

An anti-acne treatment with a very high success rate is oral **isotretinoin** (a retinoid). It's available only on prescription under the brand names **ROACCUTANE**, **ORATANE**, **ISOHEXAL** and **ACCURE**.

Isotretinoin attacks all the contributing causes of acne. It reduces the amount of sebum made by the glands in your skin, reduces bacteria and inflammation, and opens clogged pores.

But it can have serious side effects, including depression and birth defects. Isotretinoin should only be prescribed for people with severe acne — see *The Roaccutane debate*, below, for more.

Treatment summary

Over-the-counter (OTC) products

TRY FIRST

Benzoyl peroxide

MAY HELP

Azelaic acid
Resorcinol
Sulphur
Salicylic acid
Tea tree oil
Topical vitamin A
Zinc supplements

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ANTISEPTIC CLEANSERS (no good evidence of effectiveness)

Triclosan
Cetrimide
Chlorhexidine gluconate
Phenoxyisopropanol

Prescription acne treatments (if OTC products don't help)

TOPICAL RETINOIDS

Tretinoin
Isotretinoin
Adapalene

TOPICAL ANTIBIOTICS

Clindamycin
Erythromycin

ORAL ANTIBIOTICS

Doxycycline
Tetracycline
Erythromycin
Minocycline

HORMORMAL TREATMENT

Contraceptive pill

FOR SEVERE ACNE

Oral isotretinoin

Effective contraception should be used diligently during treatment and for one month before and after. Breastfeeding is also not advised while taking this drug.

DEPRESSION

The drug's been linked to serious depression and even suicide. The US Food and Drug Authority (FDA) revealed in 2000 it was receiving a growing number of reports of psychiatric side effects, including suicides, in patients taking the drug Accutane (the US version of Roaccutane).

However, while it does happen, reported mood change associated with isotretinoin is relatively uncommon. Current medical estimates put it at 1–2% of patients. Doctors point out that it's difficult to determine whether the drug really is the cause because people with severe acne are more prone to depression, as are teenagers.

OVER-PRESCRIPTION?

Generally only dermatologists can prescribe isotretinoin. While for some people it's the only solution to a debilitating medical and psychological problem, there's concern overseas that it's too often prescribed for mild and moderate acne that could be treated some other way.

MORE INFORMATION

- www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/accutane/medicationguide.htm.
- www.roaccutanesurvivors.com.
- www.rocheusa.com/products/accutane/

ACNE AND JUNK FOOD

Despite the myths, acne isn't caused by junk food. Studies have found no connection between acne and chocolate, chips or pizza. However, researchers are currently investigating whether there's a link between acne and high glycaemic index (GI) foods, such as white bread and potatoes.

Reader car reviews

Shopping for a family car? Here's what our readers thought of three popular models.

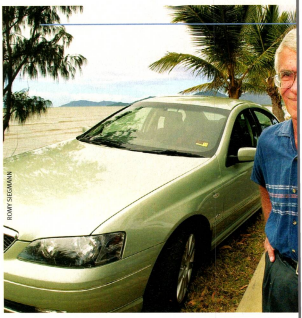
IN A NUTSHELL

There's only so much *research you can do yourself before buying a new car. But how well does it perform in everyday driving situations? Do the features work? How is it for space and noise? Check out what owners of three popular large cars have to say.*

The motoring press and especially the internet (for example, the 'cars' section on www.choice.com.au) offer a wide range of information when you're buying a car, such as road tests, crash test results and repair costs, but most of it doesn't tell you what the car's like to drive and use day-to-day.

That's why we asked a small panel of CHOICE readers to tell us why they chose a particular model, whether they've had problems with it, its strengths and weaknesses, and whether they consider it good value for money.

Thanks very much to everyone who participated. We received a sufficient number of survey responses to enable us to report on the **FORD Falcon, HOLDEN Commodore** and **TOYOTA Camry V6.**



ROAR SIEGMANN

"I chose my Fairmont Ghia because I was happy with the previous model. The car handles and drives beautifully and is very comfortable. However, there are ongoing problems with the brakes. And I'd have expected side curtain airbags and certainly a full-size spare wheel as standard equipment in this kind of car."

John Lohberger, Cairns, Queensland

"My Camry Sportivo is so comfortable in all aspects. It performs well, has good fuel economy and a great range of features — it's such a delight to be in this vehicle."

Dale Irwin, Kambah, ACT

Toyota Camry V6

Price range (RRP): $31,490–$48,990
Versions: Altise, Altise Sport, Ateva, Sportivo, Azura
Body styles: Sedan
Engine options: 3.0 L V6
ANCAP* safety rating: ★★★★

* *The Australian New Car Assessment Program crash-tests cars to find out the level of protection they provide to their occupants. The highest rating is five stars. Crash test results are only comparable for cars of a similar weight.*

ANDREW CAMPBELL

COMFORTABLE AND FEATURE-PACKED

Most of our reviewers were men over 50, who mainly bought the upmarket Azura and Sportivo versions with auto transmission.

They were looking for a comfortable and reliable sedan. Half didn't even consider any other model because they were impressed by the range and quality of the **CAMRY**'s features.

A towbar and headlight and bonnet protectors were the main options purchased. The only missing feature mentioned by more than one reviewer was the lack of an outside (ambient air) temperature display — and they clearly had to think long and hard about that one…

One car was affected by a recall, and there was one repair under warranty. Apart from that, our reviewers were very happy with all aspects of the car (especially its comfort, power and features), and felt well protected when driving it (the **CAMRY** rated four ANCAP stars). One owner (out of eight) told us he was disappointed with the purchase, but like all the others would still consider buying the same model again.

The purchase price was considered to be on the high side (as mentioned, most reviewers bought more upmarket versions), but the overall value for money good.

Ford Falcon

Price range (RRP): $33,860–$51,255
Versions: XT, Futura, XR6, XR6T (turbo), XR8, Fairmont, Fairmont Ghia
Body styles: Sedan, wagon (XT and Futura)
Engine options: 4.0 L six cylinders (all but XR8), 4.0 L six cylinders turbo (XR6T), 5.4 L V8 (XR8)
ANCAP safety rating: ★★★★

GOOD POWER BUT RELIABILITY PROBLEMS I

Our **FALCON** reviewers were a mix of ages and most were men. They mainly bought the basic XT, XR6 or Fairmont versions, and most opted for automatic transmission.

When shopping for a car they were looking for space, comfort, reliability, build quality and safety. They also considered the **HOLDEN Commodore**, but decided on the **FALCON** based on its price and *Wheels* Car of the Year award.

While most reviewers use the car mainly for city and town driving, they think it's best suited to longer highway trips — perhaps because of its relatively high fuel consumption around town, which was listed as one of the main weaknesses.

Visibility out of the car and a number of reliability issues also bothered some owners. There was one breakdown, several cars were affected by a recall, and there were a number of repairs under warranty (for example, brakes, and oil or coolant leaks), leaving several owners pretty unhappy. Five (out of 23) told us the car didn't meet their expectations and they wouldn't buy it again.

On the other hand, reviewers generally praised the **FALCON**'s power and performance, its handling, spaciousness and comfort.

The car is obviously well equipped, as mats, tinted windows and a towbar were the main options purchased. This is probably the reason why most owners consider the car good value for money, although they scored its purchase price and running costs as medium to high.

The **FALCON** rates four ANCAP stars, and our reviewers feel they'd be well protected in a crash.

"I found my Commodore Acclaim to be better-equipped than its competitors. I like its smooth ride, street appeal and power. However, it's quite thirsty and I've had a number of problems repaired under warranty."
John Hwang, Macgregor, Queensland

Holden Commodore

Price range (RRP): $31,970–$52,805
Versions: Executive, Acclaim, Berlina, S, SV8, SS
Body styles: Sedan, wagon (Executive, Acclaim, Berlina, SS)
Engine options: 3.8 L V6 (all but SV8 and SS), 3.8 L V6 supercharged (optional on the S), 5.7 L V8 (SV8 and SS, optional on the Berlina)
ANCAP safety rating: ★★★★

GOOD POWER BUT RELIABILITY PROBLEMS II

All our **COMMODORE** reviewers were men, and they reported mainly on the more upmarket Berlina and S versions. Most of them had owned a **HOLDEN** before.

They were after a comfortable, reliable and well-built car. They picked the **COMMODORE** over the **FORD Falcon**, **MITSUBISHI Magna** and **TOYOTA Camry** for its level of features, comfort and resale value. Other strengths listed include the car's power and performance, handling and style.

On the other hand, some reviewers complained about its high fuel consumption (most use it for city and town driving) and problems with reliability and build quality. Three cars were affected by a fuel gauge recall, and there were several repairs under warranty.

Two owners (out of eight) were disappointed with their purchase and wouldn't be very likely to buy the model again.

The **COMMODORE** is obviously well equipped, as mudflaps, floormats, and a towbar were the main options purchased, and owners weren't missing any features. This is probably the reason why they consider it good overall value for money, although they scored the car's purchase price and running costs as medium to high.

The car rates four ANCAP stars, and its owners feel well protected in it.

EXTRA INFO

Take a look at www.choiceextra.com.au. It gives you access to our reliability, repair costs and ANCAP safety data. For a limited time it'll also give you access to our new and used car databases, to help you choose a model. Just look under 'cars' in the index.

Mid-price vacuum cleaners

We put 11 machines through their paces.

IN A NUTSHELL

- **Generally, the mid-price** *models in this test scored better for dirt removal than the cheaper vacs we tested for* CHOICE, *July 2003.*
- **While there were no** *bad models in this test, several were let down in one or more areas.*

Judging by the results of this test, spending a bit more on a vacuum cleaner might give you better dirt removal than choosing a cheap alternative.

But previous tests have also shown that you can probably spend too much on a vacuum cleaner. When we tested expensive models in July 2002, we found that they cleaned only a little better than cheap models, but cost four times as much (and we concluded they weren't worth buying).

So perhaps mid-price vacuum cleaners are the best solution: not too cheap, not too expensive — but just right?

To find out, we tested a range of vacuum cleaners from major manufacturers priced between $250 and $500. With the exception of the **HOOVER Windtunnel U5435-906,** all the models are barrel vacs.

We put the cleaners through extensive laboratory evaluation, paying careful attention to dirt removal on both carpet and hard floor and ease of use. For details see the table notes on page 45.

DUST BUSTERS

The cleaner that scored best for dirt removal from carpet in its standard configuration (without a turbo or power head) was the upright **HOOVER Windtunnel** (but see the *Profiles,* right, for what lets this machine down).

Several barrel models were also good 'suckers', scoring well for dirt removal on both carpet and hard floor: the **MIELE S 571 Super Air Clean**, **ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer** (by far the quietest vacuum cleaner tested), **LG Vollk Max** and **SAMSUNG SC7060.** And the **HOOVER Conquest** outperformed its **Windtunnel** cousin with its power head attachment fitted. (But see *Motor mouths?*, below, for more on power heads.)

MOTOR MOUTHS?

Several of the vacs have a power head or turbo brush attachment designed to boost cleaning performance.

Both types of attachment replace the standard head of the cleaner. Power heads have an inbuilt motor that operates an additional brush, while turbo

Continued on page 44

WHAT TO BUY

MIELE S 571	$399
ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer Z3347.1600W	$399
SAMSUNG SC7060	$399
Very good performance on carpet with power head/turbo brush fitted:	
LG Vollk Max V-CA805CEU	$330
HOOVER Conquest VC9009	$399
Upright model:	
HOOVER Windtunnel U5435-906	$399

Profiles

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order, left to right. Prices are recommended retail as at May/June 2004.

MIELE S 571 SUPER AIR CLEAN

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Best barrel model for dirt removal (using standard cleaning head).
- Very good reach from power point.
- Easy to manoeuvre.
- Adjustable telescopic wand.

BAD POINTS

- Cleaning head is hard to push/pull on carpet due to strong suction.

ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer Z3347.1600W

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- HEPA filter (see *What to look for*, page 44).
- Excellent reach from power point.
- Quietest model in this test.
- Easy to manoeuvre.
- Adjustable telescopic wand.

BAD POINTS

- No onboard storage for tools.

SAMSUNG SC7060

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Manufacturer claims supplied filter is HEPA class.
- Very good reach from power point.
- Easy to manoeuvre.
- Adjustable telescopic wand.
- Excellent controls on the wand.

BAD POINTS

- High-pitched whistle can be irritating.
- Plastic bin dirt receptacle can be messy and fiddly to empty.

LG VOLLK MAX V-CA805CEU

Price: $330

GOOD POINTS

- HEPA filter.
- Improved performance with turbo brush (supplied as a standard accessory).
- Excellent reach from power point
- Adjustable telescopic wand.
- Excellent controls on the wand.

BAD POINTS

- High-pitched whistle can be irritating.
- Cleaning head is relatively hard to push on carpet.

HOOVER CONQUEST VC9009

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Best barrel cleaner on carpet when using the power head (supplied as a standard accessory).
- Equal best at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Very good reach from power point.
- Adjustable telescopic wand.
- Easy to swap between power head and standard cleaning head.

BAD POINTS

- Lowest dirt removal score on carpet when using the standard cleaning head.
- Power head has a tendency to 'run away' from the user.

HOOVER WINDTUNNEL U5435-906

Price: $399

GOOD POINTS

- Very good cleaner on carpet.
- Excellent reach from power point.
- Excellent controls on the wand.

BAD POINTS

- Not suitable for hard floors, brush tends to scatter dirt over the floor.
- Cleaning head tiring to move on carpet.
- Not very good at cleaning corners and along edges.
- Very noisy.
- Cleaning head a little too high to reach under low furniture easily.
- Cleaning head left faint wheel marks on the polished surface.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The **NILFISK, PANASONIC, SANYO** and **DELONGHI** are also worth considering, especially if you find them at a good price. Keep in mind that these cleaners performed slightly worse on carpet than the top four, so might be better in a home with hard floors.
- The **AIRFLO** badly scratched hard floors and had an irritating high-pitched whistle.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE 1 Overall score (%)	2 Dirt removal score, carpet (%)	3 Dirt removal score, hard floor (%)	4 Scratch test score (%)	5 Corners and edges score (%)	6 Ease of use score (%)	7 Noise (dB)	8 FEATURES Dust collector
MIELE S 571 Super Air Clean	85	79	97	100	76	82	67	Paper bag
ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer Z3347.1600W	83	75	100	100	69	80	59	Paper bag
SAMSUNG SC7060	83	73 **(B)**	99	100	70	82	68	Bin/internal paper
LG Vollk Max V-CA805CEU	82	74 **(C)**	98	100	74	78	67	Paper or cloth bag
NILFISK KING 505	80	69	98	100	76	75	63	Paper bag
PANASONIC MC-5030	79	68	98	100	75	75	68	Bin
HOOVER Conquest VC9009	78	58 **(D)**	100	100	85	80	67	Paper bag
SANYO SC-X1000	78	65	100	100	79	73	71	Bin
DELONGHI Aquill XTW-15E **(A)**	77	68	96	100	77	68	71	Paper bag
HOOVER Windtunnel U5435-906 (upright)	76	88	87	50	62	63	78	Paper bag
AIRFLO Galaxy AFV 5002P	74	60 **(E)**	100	20	77	83	69	Paper bag

Continued from 43

brush models use airflow to operate the extra brush. These attachments tend to make units bulkier and/or heavier and models may not be as easy to use or manoeuvre. So, in this test we've compared models on their most basic and typical vacuum cleaner set-up because we're not convinced you'd want to use the other heads all the time.

Our test shows that turbo brush and especially power head attachments can be worthwhile in some cases. In particular, the power head supplied with the **HOOVER Conquest** dramatically improved its dirt removal ability on carpet to an impressive 94%, giving it the best dirt removal overall. The distributor says it recommends using the power head all the time on carpet, but the supplied instructions don't indicate this. The **AIRFLO** also had improved dirt removal with its power head attached — up to 73% from 60%.

But a turbo brush tends to make less difference. While the **SAMSUNG SC7060** rated equal second overall, its turbo brush gave only a minor improvement and seems largely a waste of plastic.

POWER WITHOUT GLORY?

This test reinforces what we've seen before — that you can't pick good cleaning performance on the basis of the 'power' of the vacuum cleaner's motor, despite some manufacturers' emphasis on these large impressive numbers.

The second most powerful model, the **AIRFLO**, had the second worst dirt removal score on carpet (using its standard cleaning head), while the **ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer**, the least powerful cleaner on test, had better dirt removal than many more 'powerful' machines.

Don't fall for 'more power is better' marketing gimmicks — it just ain't necessarily so. ■

What to look for

You can't go past a vacuum cleaner that's light, quiet and easy to manoeuvre over both carpet and hard surfaces. A long cord, so you're not forever changing power points, as well as a neat compact design for easy storage, are other bonuses.

Another factor to consider carefully is the type of dirt collector. Bin and (in particular) cloth receptacles are messier and harder to empty, while paper bags are more user-friendly, but have ongoing costs.

The following features are also useful — see the table for which models have them, if it's not stated here:

- **Accessories:** A crevice nozzle, upholstery tool and a dusting brush. All of the cleaners tested had these.

- **Blower:** A godsend when it's time to blow up the airbed.
- **HEPA filter:** This stands for high-efficiency particulate air filtration. It's an international standard for filters that trap minute particle emissions. This type of filter can help if you have asthma or a dust allergy or sensitivity, but you have to clean or replace it regularly (about once a year) to ensure it works

Variable suction/power (left): A control on the wand allows you to vary the suction or power for more delicate jobs such as cleaning curtains.

FOR PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

We assessed how suitable the vacuum cleaners are for someone with a disability, using guidelines supplied by the Independent Living Centre (NSW).

None is ideal, but the **ELECTROLUX Ultra Silencer,** which was also the second best model overall, can be recommended with some reservations: it has excellent reach, is fairly lightweight, compact and easy to move, and has an adjustable telescopic wand and easy-to-clean dirt receptacle, but its controls may be too small for some and the markings don't stand out well.

oard rage	Variable power	Blower facility	HEPA filter	Wand suction control	Bag/bin full indicator	SPECIFICATIONS 9 Power, max. speed (measured, W)	Reach (m)	Weight (kg)	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Price ($)*
	✓	(F)	(G)	✓	✓	1610	9.6	7.9	2	Germany	Miele	399
	✓		✓	✓	✓	1270	12.0	7.4	2	Sweden	Electrolux	399
	✓		(H)		✓	1350	8.8	7.0	2 / 3 (J)	Korea	Samsung	399
	✓		✓		✓	1720	12.0	9.2	2	Korea	LG Electronics	330
			✓	✓		1280	10.4	8.1	5 (K)	Denmark	Nilfisk Advance	399
	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	1450	8.4	8.1	2	Malaysia	Panasonic	285
	✓			✓	✓	1320	8.2	8.7	1	China	Hoover Floorcare	399
			✓	✓	✓	1460	8.8	8.9	2 / 1 (L)	China	Sanyo	269
	✓			✓	✓	1500	11.2	11.1	2	Europe	DeLonghi	499
					✓	1300	10.6	8.2	2	Mexico	Hoover Floorcare	399
	✓		✓	✓	✓	1670	11.6	7.5	ns	China	Airflo	399

efficiently. There are also other measures you can take to help with these health problems — see CHOICE, July 2002, or go to www.choiceextra.com.au and click on 'expensive vacuum cleaners' in the index.

- **Adjustable head height:** This allows you to adjust the height of the bristles on the cleaning head to the length of the carpet pile, or for when you're vacuuming hard surfaces. Only the **HOOVER Windtunnel, LG Vollk Max** (with turbo brush fitted) and **SAMSUNG SC7060** (with turbo brush fitted) have this feature.
- **Telescopic wand:** This lets you adjust the wand to suit your height, so you shouldn't have to bend your back too much. All models have one except the **DELONGHI Aquilli XTW-15E, HOOVER Windtunnel** and **NILFISK King MC-4620.**
- **Wand storage:** All the barrel models have a spot where the wand can be attached to the cleaner to reduce trip hazard.

A power head (above left) has an inbuilt motor that operates an additional brush, and replaces the standard cleaning head. Using one generally improves dirt removal from carpets, whereas a turbo head (which uses airflow to operate the extra brush) is usually less effective.

* *Prices are recommended retail, supplied by manufacturers in May/June 2004.*

(A) *Includes carpet shampooing features.*

(B) *When tested with the supplied turbo brush, the dirt removal on carpet score increased slightly to 74%.*

(C) *When tested with the supplied turbo brush, the dirt removal on carpet score increased to 80%.*

(D) *When tested with the supplied power head, the dirt removal on carpet score increased to 94%.*

(E) *When tested with the supplied power head, the dirt removal on carpet score increased to 73%.*

(F) *Available as an optional accessory (RRP $17.50).*

(G) *Active HEPA filter available as an optional extra (RRP $50).*

(H) *Manufacturer claims that supplied filter is HEPA class.*

(J) *Two years on nozzles, hoses, tubes and other accessories; three years on motor.*

(K) *Five years excluding nozzles, hoses, tubes and other accessories.*

(L) *Two years on cleaner; one year on tools, hoses and accessories.*

1 Overall score

This is made up of:

- Dirt removal on carpet: 35%
- Dirt removal on hard floor: 21%
- Scratch test (hard floor): 7%
- Cleaning corners and edges: 7%
- Ease of use: 30%

2 Dirt removal from carpet

We embedded 100 g of sand evenly into a section of carpet and vacuumed it to a set pattern and speed. The dirt collected was then weighed and recorded as a percentage of the dirt applied. We did this twice for each model and averaged the results.

3 Dirt removal from hard floors

The same test as for carpet, but using 50 g of sand, spread evenly over half the area of a section of medium density fibreboard. The vacuum cleaner is set to hard floor setting or a hard floor tool is used when supplied. The percentage of dirt collected is measured.

4 Scratch test

The surface of a lacquered fibreboard panel was checked for scratch marks.

5 Cleaning corners and edges

Sand was spread into a 90° corner and vacuumed to see how well each cleaner is able to reach into corners and pick up dirt.

6 Ease of use

This is based on how easy the body of the cleaner is to manoeuvre and how easy it is to move the cleaning head over carpet and under low furniture; how difficult it is to empty and change the dirt collector; the operation of the controls and how easy the supplied accessories are to use and store. We also considered use on stairs and the location of controls.

7 Noise

Measured at the user's position.

8 Features

See *What to look for*, left, for more information on features.

9 Measured power

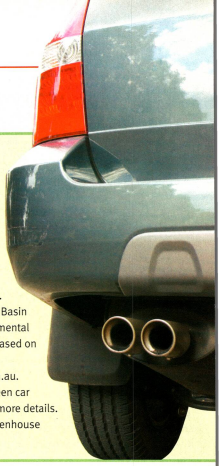
See *Power without glory?*, left.

Can you help?

IDENTITY FRAUD

Have you been a victim of identity fraud? Has the security of your personal information been violated? CHOICE *Money & Rights* is looking into identity fraud and would like to hear from you if you've had an experience you'd like to share. Contact us by August 15 at **idfraud@choice.com.au**, fax (02) 9577 3377 or write to **Identity fraud**, CHOICE *Money & Rights*, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204. Thanks for your help.

Incentive to go green



Credit union **MECU** (Members and Education Credit Union) and environmental group **GREENFLEET** have joined forces to create the goGreen Car Loan. They're offering cheaper loans to customers who buy fuel-efficient cars.

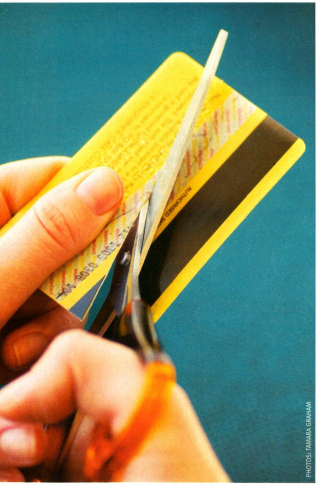
MECU has switched its entire range of car loans to the goGreen banner to encourage people to buy cars with less environmental impact. Basically, the more fuel-efficient your car is, the lower the interest rate you pay, starting from 7.24%.

GREENFLEET will plant 17 native trees in the Murray Darling Basin for each year of every loan to further reduce the cars' environmental impact. This should offset 100% of the car's CO_2 emissions, based on average fuel consumption.

For more information call 132 888 or go to www.mecu.com.au.

Queensland-based **MALENY CREDIT UNION** also offers a green car loan. Call (07) 5494 2144 or go to www.malenycu.com.au for more details.

To check a car's fuel consumption go to the Australian Greenhouse Office website at www.greenhouse.gov.au.



PHOTOS: TAMARA GRAHAM

Flick your bank

Are you tired of paying high fees and earning next to no interest in return? It might be time to give your everyday bank transaction account the flick. CHOICE *Money & Rights* has found you may be able to make big savings by switching.

Many types of account fee erode your savings. The main fees to know about include account and direct-debit fees, as well as those charged when you use EFTPOS, ATM services, over-the-counter, internet and phone banking. If you don't watch your balance, you can also be charged hefty one-off fees such as overdraft fees, penalty interest and dishonour fees.

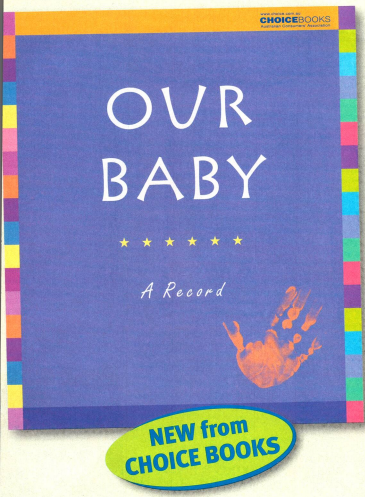
The fees you pay depend on which bank you use. Examine your transaction habits and try to find the most suitable bank and account to match them. Use the account selector at our new free website, **www.flickyourbank.com.au,** to compare fees and features from banks, building societies and credit unions. You'll also find tips on the site to take the hassle out of switching banks.

Transaction accounts are typically used for everyday deposits and withdrawals. Money is usually accessed through ATMs, branches, phone banking and the internet. But your banking options go beyond these traditional accounts: cash management accounts and trusts, online savings accounts and term deposits may have some restrictions such as a minimum opening balance or a limited range of transactions allowed, but unlike most transaction accounts they can offer decent returns.

Your choice of account depends on your needs and circumstances. Different categories of account holder may get fee rebates or exemptions. Some banks and credit unions waive transaction fees for mortgage holders, and children and pensioners may also benefit in some cases.

Finally, check your account statements to make sure you haven't been overcharged — the Banking and Financial Services Ombudsman's last annual report detailed how one bank incorrectly charged around 4000 customers.

You can find more on how to switch accounts, including 'flick your bank in eight simple steps' and an account comparison table, in the August/September issue of CHOICE *Money & Rights*. To subscribe call 1800 069 552 or go to www.choice.com.au/magazines.



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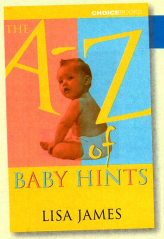

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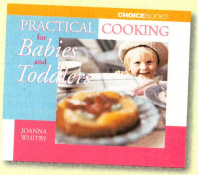

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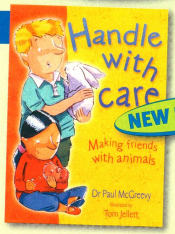

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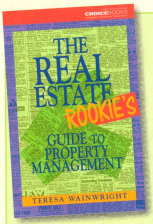

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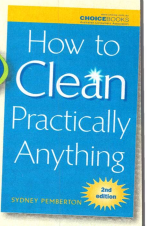

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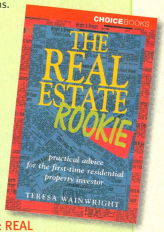

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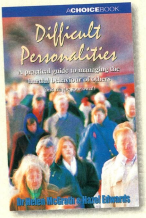

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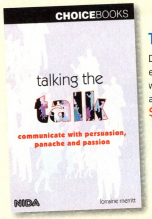

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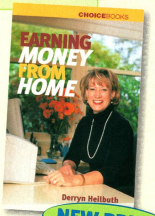

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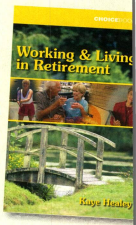

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recalls&bans

Nowadays there are so many product recalls we may not be able to print all of them in CHOICE. For comprehensive recall information go to the Federal Treasury website: www.recalls.gov.au. If you don't have web access, call the Consumer Safety Unit on (02) 6263 2747.

Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after a recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

FOOD: Mur Thai Food Co has recalled **Vinawang Pumpkin Seed Cake**, sold in a 100 g cellophane pack (eight per pack), best-before dates 31/12/2005 (lot numbers 031201 and 031001) and 12/2005 (lot number 030710), imported from Vietnam.
The problem: It contains undeclared peanut protein.
What to do: If you have a peanut protein allergy or intolerance, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD: La Tosca Pasta has recalled **La Tosca Sugodoro Bolognese Sauce with beef**, sold in a 310 g can with batch codes (located on bottom of can) starting with 02 or 03.
The problem: It wasn't heated sufficiently when processed, which may cause microbial growth.
What to do: Don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or for more information call (03) 9387 2677.

FOOD: Sanhuo has recalled **Sunlight White Sesame Seeds**, sold in a 150 g plastic packet, use-by date K 12/02/2005, produced in Taiwan.
The problem: Salmonella was found during routine Government testing.
What to do: Don't eat this product. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

FOOD: Blenner's Meat Market in Tully, Queensland has recalled **BBQ beef sausages**, random weights (packed individually for each customer).
The problem: During a break-in at the store in May, a batch of BBQ beef sausages was tampered with and contaminated with an unknown substance.
What to do: If you froze this product for later use, don't eat it. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

TOY: Toys 'R' Us has recalled **Dream Dazzlers ride-on toy vehicle**, model number 3-50103D, with a manufacture code 20021127 to 20030319 located inside the battery compartment on the top panel next to the steering wheel. It was sold at Toys "R" Us stores between March 2003 and April 2004.
The problem: The screw and nut assembly attaching the steering wheel may come loose and pose a choking hazard to young children.
What to do: Stop children using it. Return it to your nearest Toys "R" Us store where a new safety assembly will be fitted.

TOY: Cosmic Imports has recalled **Tuff Toys Super Disc Shooter**, barcodes 9331520097 68 and 9331520099 80, sold in discount stores nationwide between April 2003 and April 2004. It consists of a red, black, green, orange or blue toy gun with a plastic chamber that contains multi-coloured foam discs.
The problem: The discs are an inhalation/choking hazard.
What to do: Immediately remove the toy from children's reach and return it to the place of purchase for a refund.

KETTLE: Sunbeam has recalled **Sunbeam Quantum plastic kettle**, models KE3560 and KE3860, sold from March 2003 to May 2004. The kettles can be identified by the model number, year of manufacture (the third digit on the date code will be 3 or 4) and by the country of origin stamping "Made in China", all on the underside of the kettle.
The problem: These kettles contain incorrect heating element conductor wires at the base of the kettle, which may overheat and melt through the kettle body, exposing live 240 V wires.
What to do: Stop using the kettle, and return it to the place of purchase for a replacement or refund. Call 1300 761 405 weekdays between 9 am and 5 pm EST for more information.

HANDSAW: Stanley has recalled **Stanley Jet Cut handsaws**, product numbers 15-281, 15-288, 15-289, 15-599 with a bi-material handle, purchased after November 2003.
The problem: The handle on these handsaws may not be secure.
What to do: Don't use it. Return it to Product Returns Officer, c/o Stanley Australia Pty Ltd, Reply Paid 48, Somerton, Victoria 3062. Include a note stating your name, address, postcode and telephone number, and ensure that the saw is well packaged with the blade safely wrapped before posting. For more information call 1800 674 510 weekdays between 8 am and 7 pm EST.

LINO TOOL: Micador Australia has recalled **Micador Special Grip lino tool**, model LIM 106, sold from January 21, 2004 to May 2004.
The problem: The steel shaft may break, causing the blade to slip from the hand, potentially causing an injury.
What to do: For more information call 1800 628 878 or (03) 9590 0122 weekdays 9 am to 5 pm EST.

HYDRAULIC JACK: TWM Imports has recalled **aluminium racing hydraulic jack**, model VP8660, sold from August 2003.
The problem: The jack was advertised as having a 1350 kg lifting capacity, but the actual lifting capacity is only 850 kg.
What to do: Contact the place of purchase for a full refund, or call (03) 9314 8588 for more information.

CAR: Holden has recalled **Holden VY II Commodore** vehicles built during the first two weeks of May, 2004.
The problem: Some driver's seats may have incomplete riveting and welding between the seat track and the mounting foot on the front right hand side. This could compromise driver safety in an accident.
What to do: Vehicle owners should be contacted directly by mail. For further information call 1800 033 349 weekdays 8 am to 7 pm and Saturday 9 am to 1 pm EST.

CAR: Honda has recalled **2001 Civic 4DR Sedan, 2001 Civic 5DR** and **2002 Civic 4DR Sedan** with the following vehicle identification number (VIN) ranges:

- 2001 Civic 4DR Sedan
  JHMES16501S200010 – S205561
- 2001 Civic 5DR
  JHMEU37301S200003 – S204484
  JHMEU37501S200003 – S204484
  JHMEU38301S200003 – S204484
  JHMEU38501S200003 – S204484
- 2002 Civic 4DR Sedan
  MRHES1550 02P040001 – P040060
  MRHES1650 02P040001 – P040270

The VIN is located in the engine compartment on the rear panel (firewall) and in the Owners' Warranty and Service Policy Manual (inside front cover).
The problem: The headlamp low-beam may not operate, due to an increase in contact resistance between the headlamp switch assembly and the adjoining terminal coupler. This increase in resistance may produce heat and melt the terminal connector.
What to do: Vehicle owners should be contacted directly by mail to arrange for a replacement headlamp switch assembly to be installed. Call 1800 804 954 weekdays 8:30 am to 5:30 pm EST with any further enquiries.

CAR: Toyota has recalled **Toyota Kluger**, model MCU28, produced from May 30, 2003 to January 28, 2004 inclusive, within the VIN range: JTE EP21A# 00001001 – 00031328 JTE HP21A# 00001001 – 00031328 (where # represents any single character – alpha or numeric).
The problem: The child protector locks on the rear side doors may deactivate when the doors are closed hard, and this may not be noticed.
What to do: Vehicle owners should be contacted directly by mail so the problem can be rectified. For more information call 1800 643 242 weekdays 8 am to 4:30 pm EST.

aboutchoice

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance their quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

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For Only... $29.00*
Per Person Per Night Twin Share. 7 Nights
Why not take a fabulous low cost holiday in the heart of Surfers Paradise?
One street back from fully patrolled beach. Close to all clubs, shops and restaurants. 1, 2, 3 and 4 bedroom self contained units. From a very low $29.00
Aarons
Surfers Paradise

Don't you just love fine print?

A "week by the beach for only $29" actually turns out to be $203 *per person*, provided you have a friend to fork out another $203. And we reckon one street back from the beach isn't exactly "by the beach".

250mL Pop Tops Pipelime Drink
INGREDIENTS: WATER, SUGAR, FOOD ACID (330), FLAVOUR, PRESERVATIVES (202, 223), COLOURS (102, 133).
SHAKE WELL. REFRIGERATE AFTER OPENING.

25% fruit or merely a pipedream?

Unless sugar's considered fruit (sugar cane's a plant ... and it's sweet ...), it's hard to see where the '25% fruit' comes from.

Fresh or frozen fresh?

Our reader bought these muffins planning to put one in her son's lunchbox and freeze the rest for other occasions. It was only when she got home that she discovered they'd previously been frozen and thawed, and shouldn't be refrozen. Fresh? We don't think so.

Stop Slipping Carpets... Stop Nasty Falls!

Keep Rugs In Place

Loose floor mats or carpets can be very dangerous and often results in serious injury. Hold your rugs firmly in place with these Non-Skid Adhesive Foam Pads. Simply cut the tape to desired length, peel off adhesive backing and attach. Won't leave a greasy residue and perfect for all types of floors.
H887 NON-SKID

✔ *Easy To Apply*
✔ *Keep Carpet Edges Down*

Looks like somebody's slipped up ...

And we don't mean Granny. How does a rug-holder-in-placer have anything to do with puddles?

THE ULTIMATE KITCHEN APPLIANCE?

Just think how much space it would save!

LG 32L Microwave Dishwasher
1100W, 284mm turntable, 41 Aussie menus, auto reheat & auto cook, stainless steel fascia.

$349.00
NOTHING TO PAY
TAKE ME HOME TODAY

$50 COLES VOUCHER†

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The prize for this month's best entry goes to D Cusworth. *The Hard Word* would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to L Furlong, A Ellis, D Cusworth, V Nicoll, A Parker and S Briggs for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep them coming.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.